tezgelen

yiğit feza

Preface

Some questions choose you.

Years ago I came across an image: a winged figure holding an unfamiliar object in its hand. It was Sumerian. Then I saw the same object somewhere else — at Göbekli Tepe, carved into stone thousands of years before writing. Then among the Maya, on the far side of the ocean, in the hand of a people who could not possibly have had any contact with the others. The same form, the same bearing, always cradled in the palm of some exalted being. No one had seen anyone else; and yet every one of them held the same bag.

From that day on, the question would not leave me. What was inside it? Why always in the hand, never once opened?

This short novel went after that question. Perhaps somewhere while reading you will pause and say, “I know this from somewhere.” That oldest memory is the same in all of us.

Yiğit Feza

Bursa, 2026

I. Discovery

On November mornings the Taurus woke first not to light but to colour. Before the sun cleared the mountain's spine, the sky would take on, for half an hour, a tone that had no name. Neither night nor day, but something exactly between the two, something no colour could answer for. Farah loved that half hour. She would sit, grip her tea glass tightly in her left hand, and look around her — she could not stay indifferent to beauty; she had never tried to, the idea of trying had never so much as occurred to her.

Across from her, Yalçın was reading something. Or seemed to be — he was looking not at the page but a little past it, drawn inward as though trying to close out some calculation in his mind. Farah had known this for years. That look meant he had been left in the middle of something; the sign of a reckoning still unfinished, with no telling when he would return to it. Sometimes he came back to the matter in a single sentence; sometimes he forgot it entirely. Both outcomes closed with their own strange, particular satisfaction.

The pension's stone terrace was wet that morning. Dew had fallen in the night, or someone had hosed it down toward dawn; it was hard to tell. In the small courtyard below, a cat had settled onto a plastic chair and was watching a corner the sun had not yet reached — not impatiently, only waiting. From far off came the intermittent sound of a tractor; the sound would surface, then cut out. The sounds the mountains made at this hour were like that: coming and going, never completed.

"The numbers didn't add up last night," Yalçın said. He said it without lifting his eyes from the page, as if talking to himself.

Farah did not set down her glass. "Which numbers?"

"All of them."

There was nothing to say to that. Yalçın sometimes spoke this way — he would open a subject with one sentence and close it with one sentence; there was no middle. Farah was used to it. Now and then an expectation would form in her that he would go on, and then it would pass.

She buttered her bread, took an olive. She looked at the mountains. For three weeks now they had been sitting every morning at the same table, facing the same direction, at nearly the same hour. It was not quite a habit; habits settle in unnoticed, whereas there was something deliberate in this — a decision each of them had made separately and never spoken of. An order that was not broken by one of them leaving early or arriving late, one that was quietly respected.

Just then the sun came up from behind the mountain; for a few seconds the stones gleamed like gold. Something came to Farah's mind — that line of Ibn Arabi's, what he had written on the aʿyān al-thābita, those passages that speak of the eternal trace of every being in the divine consciousness. Everything had existed somewhere even before it came to be; it could be found, it was not lost. Perhaps this morning light, too, had always stood somewhere just like this, only waiting to arrive, every day at the same point, at the same angle.

The kitchen door rattled from inside, then opened a crack. Auntie Şerife came out onto the terrace with the tray she had just emptied — the woman who, together with Uncle Fahri, carried the work of the pension, the one who came down before everyone else in the mornings. When she walked she never quite set her heel to the floor; as though there were always someone in the house she was afraid of waking. She stopped as she passed the table.

"Good morning," she said. "You've eaten little again."

“We’re full, thank you,” Farah said. She gathered the olive pits on her plate off to one side, then let her hand fall — there was no point in gathering them, it was only so her hand would not sit idle.

Auntie Şerife rested the tray against her hip. Her eyes slid for a moment to the mountains, toward that side, toward where the cave was; then they came back. “Much more of this work left?”

It was an ordinary question, the village’s question — they had come, they had been here a while, when would they leave. But in Farah it touched somewhere else. It had been three weeks. She heard Ada’s voice only over the phone, saw that crease of sleep on her cheek only through a screen. She did not know herself when it would end — or she did know, and was afraid even to admit to herself that she did not want it to end.

“We don’t know,” she said. “Whenever the mountain lets us go.”

Auntie Şerife laughed at that, not because she understood but because it pleased her. “As if it ever lets go,” she said. “It holds and holds, and then one day you find the door open.” She turned to Yalçın. “You don’t eat anyway, I know. Let me at least freshen your tea.”

“All right,” Yalçın said. He said nothing else; but he pushed his plate a few centimetres toward the woman — not the dish of pits, the full one, for her to take.

The woman cleared neither; that was not her intention. It was only to say something in passing, to pause for a moment. She took up her tray, went back to the kitchen. The door drew shut behind her. That half-silence settled over the terrace again — the silence in which the cat waited and the tractor came and went.

Farah watched after her for a while. The tea in front of her had long gone cold.

Yalçın closed his book. “We’re late.”

Farah looked at her glass. It was still half full. She finished it in one swallow.

The path was narrow and stony. Where it passed among the trees the air was still cool; there was a desolation of the kind in which shade keeps its own. Yalçın walked ahead, as he did every morning. Farah watched him.

A few minutes on, Farah stopped. She rummaged in her bag — first quickly, then more carefully, checking the compartments inside one by one. Then she turned; her face came round toward the way they had come. The stone terrace of the pension where they had breakfasted was lost now among the trees. Her hair scattered with the motion — curly and full; there was no wind, but it made its own decisions; a dark, warm shade of red, neither quite copper nor quite brown, a colour all its own caught between the two; each time she turned her head it painted the world, for an instant, that colour in the eye of whoever faced her. She was a striking woman — you did not need to look carefully to see it.

“I forgot my clip,” she said. “It was on the table. A small black thing.”

She could not be at ease while working without a clip in her hair. It would catch in the excavation, stick to her face, fling itself about her head. A small thing, but big enough to shape the day.

Yalçın did not answer at once. He paused a second, then held out the small black clip coiled around the index finger of his left hand. The clip slid from his finger and dropped into Farah’s palm.

“Yes,” he said. “You’d forgotten it. I noticed.”

Farah took the clip. She said nothing — no thanks, nothing else. She gathered her hair quickly, fixed the clip, and went on walking. Yalçın walked too.

They reached the mouth of the cave twelve minutes later — Yalçın had once counted the twelve by looking at his watch, and then said so; Farah now knew it without counting. She knew the number of steps too, and the changes in the ground, and at which bend the air shifted and how.

Farah paused here for a moment every time. It was not required, it simply happened; for an instant her feet did not want to go. The darkness inside looked, every morning, to be of the same depth — measurable, predictable, the same each day — yet it never felt the same. The difference was small but it was real.

Yalçın plunged inside. Farah hung back a step, ran her hand over the rock face — cool, dry, rough; a familiar surface by now. Then she too went in.

The rest of the team were already inside. There was a research assistant from the university: Kemal, a recent graduate, quiet and efficient, who did the work without asking. And three local experts from Mersin who knew the region like the backs of their hands. One of their leaders was Cemil; a man who had known these mountains since his youth, who knew how each crag behaved in which season, who did not speak unless asked but did not hold himself back when he was. The beams of the helmet lamps moved heavily and calmly through the cave's half-dark — from a distance like so many fireflies, each in its own orbit, unaware of one another.

One of those lights always lagged a little behind the rest. Master Mehmet's.

He was the oldest of the local crew. He was not their head — the head was Cemil; he made the decisions, he held the fine bridge between the village and the university. Master Mehmet was the senior of them all the same; in years and in his silence. He had the air of a man who had never wanted to be in charge; or of one who had been, once, and given it up, who had learned by now that standing at the very back was enough for him. He came before everyone in the morning and left last in the evening — but he did this not for show, but because he knew no other way.

The most patient work in the cave fell to him. The work no one else had the patience for; brushing the dust off the same outcrop for minutes on end. His hands were large and cracked, thickened over the years; but in the way they met the stone there was a tenderness unsuited to his body, as if he were afraid of hurting whatever he touched. He worked without speaking. When the others laughed at a joke a flicker would appear on his face — something half the size of a smile — but he did not add his voice.

Farah had noticed him from the very first week. In those first days he had said almost nothing. He would take his morning tea in his hand and not drink it; he held the glass in his palm, stared at some point until it went cold, then poured it out. His eye would catch on ordinary things a second too long — a stone, a tree, a vehicle passing far off. This was not peace; it was a stillness, the silence of something turning endlessly inside, surfacing without. Farah had sensed it the way one senses the weather changing — before it comes, by its smell.

That morning, too, she saw him.

He was in the low corner of the main chamber, before the place where a small hand had been pressed into the stone. He was not working there; there was no brush in his hand, no notebook. He was only standing, leaning slightly forward, his hand near the rock

but not touching, his fingertips a few centimetres clear. He stayed that way a long while. As the others' lamps came and went through the chamber, his did not stir.

Farah looked from the far end of the chamber. She did not go to him. She knew that some kinds of standing-still must be left alone.

Toward noon Cemil came with his thermos. Farah took her glass, held it in her left hand, did not drink. Just as Cemil was about to turn away, Farah drew close to him and lowered her voice.

"Cemil. There's something with Master Mehmet. He has such a… sorrowful air. Did something happen?"

Cemil paused a moment. His eye slid, against his will, to the corner, then came back. He screwed the cap onto the thermos, though he needn't have, the hot water was gone; it was as if he were looking for something to keep his hands busy.

"Last summer," he said. He stopped. "He lost his daughter. A traffic accident." His voice dropped further. "His only daughter. She was coming home from school. She was a teacher."

He said nothing more. There was nothing to say; perhaps even what had been said was too much — you could read that thought on his face. Every morning he carried Master Mehmet's tea over separately, without being asked; he would put the glass in his hand, say a word or two, and come away. It was the village's way of bearing grief: not in words, but in a small continuity.

Farah did not thank him. She nodded slightly, that was all. Cemil went.

She looked at the corner again. Master Mehmet was still there, before that small hand, his hand in the air, not touching. He looked different now — but it was not Master Mehmet who had changed,

it was Farah's eye. The same man, the same posture, the same hand; nothing had been added to it, it had only become visible.

Something Ibn Arabi had said somewhere crossed her mind: that nothing which exists ever truly perishes, that everything bears a trace even before it comes into being. She did not know whether this could be a consolation to a father. Perhaps it was the opposite; perhaps the heaviest burden was to know that what you had lost still stood somewhere, and not to be able to reach it.

The stone held everything — the new and the ancient alike, with the same patience. It had held that small hand too, for who knows how many thousands of years, without ever tiring…

Tezgelen had been found eight months earlier. A shepherd tracking a lost goat had slipped in through a narrow cleft in the rock and found himself in a chamber covered with handprints. Those in the village who first heard the news did not believe it; the man had been seized by cave-fear, it was said, he had exaggerated what he saw. Then they took the headman, and after that a teacher went; the news reached the university in four days, and in six weeks the excavation permit came through. Three weeks ago Farah and Yalçın had arrived.

Inside, the cave lived in its own time, independent of the world outside. The seasons did not change here: a steady fourteen degrees, a steady humidity, a silence that never altered.

In the entrance section the ceiling was low; a few steps on it rose, but it never truly let you feel at ease: there was always a faint pressure from above, there even if you did not notice it. The floor was uneven, wet in places. The behaviour of sound was strange: a spoken word lost something of itself before it reached the far wall, and the stone swallowed a part of it.

The smell was mineral and cold, nothing else. There was no scent of anything living; only stone, and time, and whatever remained of an air that had stood undisturbed for a very long while. The team had been going in and out every day for three weeks, but they could not change that smell.

The walls were speaking. This was what Farah had thought on the very first day; nor had she changed her mind. Red ochre and black manganese: negative prints, paint blown around the hand, the hand left like a shadow on the stone; positive prints, the palm dipped in paint and pressed straight on.

Near the ceiling, at heights almost out of reach, there were prints — why anyone had gone to that effort, why anyone had climbed so high, was unknown. Almost at the floor there were prints made on the knees, or lying down.

And in one corner, the mark of a child's hand. Tiny, its five fingers clearly distinct, of someone perhaps eight years old. Right beside it, higher up, a large, broad hand — long-fingered, distinct. In the same paint, in all likelihood on the same day. Was it the mother, was it the father; who could know that long-ago day eight thousand years past. But someone, within that day, had come here and pressed their hands to this stone, and for three weeks now Farah had looked each time she passed that corner. She looked at the two of them separately, at the small and the large, feeling something but leaving it without a name.

For three weeks they had been advancing systematically. A grid had been laid out with strings stretched across the floor, each handprint photographed, measured, entered into the catalogue. The analysis unit had been set up just inside the cave's mouth — small, portable, yielding results within the day. Six thousand years, seven thousand, eight thousand — consistent, expected, results that made sense for this region. Cemil came each morning with the little

thermos, and everyone took a glass in turn; Yalçın would not take one, Farah would, but she would not give the glass back, she worked with it in her hand.

She took a break. She opened her bag, felt inside, found what she was after: a small piece of gum, the cheap kind, the sort with a fortune inside. She did not smoke in the cave — perhaps one could, but she did not want to spoil that air; it did not seem right to add her own smoke to an air that had not stirred in thousands of years. By day these gums took the place of cigarettes: a small substitution no one noticed. The evening had its own way, but that was another matter.

She popped the gum into her mouth, unfolded its paper. It was the custom of these gums: on each, four lines, most of them nonsense, now and then a fortune that oddly found its mark. She read.

Let the day gone by go now,
Tomorrow waits for you.
A hand before you,
Reached out, it waits for you.

Her eye stopped on the word "hand." A second, maybe two. This cave was full of hands: the walls were hands, the corners were hands, everything she had looked at for three weeks was a hand. The fortune could not possibly have known this, of course, it was a slip of paper printed at random. Still, it stopped there a moment.

Without lifting her eyes from the paper she began to walk, to head back to her own area. She was reading the line again to herself, her feet seeming to know the way on their own — they did

not. She did not see the small chunk of rock in front of her. Her foot caught, she groped for her balance an instant, did not find it; she fell flat on her face. Her palms struck the ground, her knee hit the stone. The gum paper flew from her hand.

As she pushed herself up she lifted her head.

Yalçın was standing before her. His hand was already out; open, waiting.

"Are you all right?"

Farah took hold of his hand. Yalçın pulled, lifted her up.

"I'm fine," she said. She smiled.

And in that moment Yalçın laughed. It was a laugh he had held in, tried to hold in but could not; it came out suddenly, unexpected, almost surprising himself. He did not turn his face away, did not hide it, could not have hidden it — that laugh was open like a handprint, telling what it was without saying what it was.

It irritated Farah. She brushed the dust off herself, glanced at her knee, said nothing. She turned, went back to her work. Behind her the laughter slowly died down.

She worked for a while. Her hands were at the task but her mind was not. Against her will, Yalçın's outstretched hand rose before her eyes — open, waiting, the hand that paused just so for an instant before pulling her up. Then the fortune came, unsummoned: *a hand before you, reached out, it waits for you.*

She lifted her head. She looked at the handprints on the wall — dozens of hands, thousands of years, every one of them having once reached toward someone, touched something, then stayed in the stone. She smiled. This time no one saw.

Before noon Yalçın went out briefly to check the analysis unit. He noticed the air was still cool; in the shade his breath became visible, and the scent of pine was sharper at this hour.

He took the pack from his pocket, drew out a cigarette, set it at the edge of his lip. Just as he was reaching for his lighter he sensed a movement behind him — he turned. It was Farah; she had come out of the cave and was walking toward him.

He said nothing. With the thumb of the hand holding the pack he nudged it slightly, and one cigarette eased up halfway out from among the others; he held the pack out to Farah. Farah took it. They both lit up. They let out the first smoke almost at the same instant; the wind carried both their plumes the same way.

"These handprints on the cave walls are like the residue of time-travellers who leave a trace in the fabric of a place as they shift dimensions," Farah said. "These petrified screams remind me of Dante's Inferno; as though, looking there, we are really watching our own entrapment in time."

"Time is not linear but a spiralling vortex of hell," Yalçın added.

"How are things outside of work?" Farah said. She asked for the sake of asking; she already knew the answer, or did not want to admit that she knew. Neither of them carried much of a life beyond work upon them — and what they did carry was only loss. But one asked, all the same; it was the thing one asks to fill the gap, by custom.

"Getting by," Yalçın said.

Farah laughed — not at the answer, but at the answer being exactly the one she had expected. Then she told him something; something in the village, a word that had caught her ear that

morning, an unimportant detail. Talking for the sake of talking, so as not to let the silence grow too large.

Yalçın's eye caught on a point, then passed beyond it, then went off entirely into the distance — behind the mountains or further still, somewhere the eye cannot see. His body was there, the cigarette burning down by itself between his fingers, but he himself was not. Farah was still talking; he did not hear. Farah noticed, but finished her sentence anyway, in a falling tone, as if speaking to herself.

Then Yalçın, out of nowhere, turned to her:

"How is Ada?"

Farah paused a moment. It was a question she had not expected — not from Yalçın, not from anywhere. The two of them never spoke this name between them; even unspoken, they knew they did not speak it. Now the name had been said, beside the smoke, and hung there between them.

"Fine," she said. Short. Then she looked away, looked at the mountains, said no more. Ada was outside this site, this conversation, the place where this man stood; she wanted her to stay there.

Yalçın nodded, did not press. Perhaps he had not even heard the answer; his question, torn loose from that far place he came and went to, had lost its force the moment it fell from his lips.

They finished their cigarettes around the same time. Yalçın crushed his stub out against the stone and tossed it into the tin by the entrance. Farah did the same. She brushed herself off, walked toward the cave.

Yalçın stayed outside a moment longer. He was about to follow right behind her when—

The phone in his pocket buzzed.

It was Tarık. Two years ago they had spent six months together at the Göbekli Tepe site. He was a good archaeologist; he liked to spot the small detail that escaped notice, the real question lying beneath the data. They had written a paper together, then each had gone his own way; messages were sent now and then, now and then they met on the pretext of a coffee. They were not close, but they had not lost touch either. A thin connection ran on between them.

"How's Mersin going?" Tarık said. His voice was easy, everyday.

"Ordinary," Yalçın said. "The catalogue's growing."

"Has it gone back as far as eight thousand?"

"Yes."

There was a short silence. Tarık was drinking something, the sound of glass or a cup came through. Then: "I was thinking about the Göbekli Tepe paper yesterday. Some conferences are coming up, the bag question is drawing interest again. It might be worth republishing."

"I can look into it," Yalçın said.

Tarık said a little more — which conference he had in mind, the dates. Then his voice shifted slightly, within the same tone but with a different weight: "Has anything unusual come up?"

Yalçın paused a moment. It was an ordinary question — a colleague's curiosity, the wish for word from the field. "Not yet," he said. "Standard progress."

"All right. We'll talk later."

The call ended. Yalçın looked at the screen a second, put it in his pocket, and went back inside.

Talking with Tarık was always like this — short, practical, leaving no empty space to fill. This conversation was the same. Still, as he went back in, that question stayed in his mind: Has anything unusual come up? He had only asked. Asking was normal.

In the first hours of the afternoon Yalçın turned to the cleft in the back wall of the main chamber. For three weeks it had been marked on the map — a cleft the width of a shoulder, its interior invisible, uncertain whether it could be passed. Every day it had been put off. Today Yalçın said only this: "Shall we have a look here?" No expectation came through in his tone; there was only the question.

Farah stopped. She looked at the cleft. She could not quite explain to herself the real reason for the delay — there was no practical obstacle, the equipment would pass, there was time. But every day something else had come first, had seemed more urgent. Then they looked at each other, as if to say, "Come on, let's get this done."

They went in one at a time. The rock pressed cold and hard against their shoulders; for a few steps the ribcage could not fully expand, and the breath shortened whether one willed it or not. Yalçın was in front. His bag dragged behind him; for a moment it seemed it would not fit through, but it did. Farah turned her body sideways and moved along behind him. Then the rock released them both. The space opened.

First the air changed. It was not bad — only different; that was as far as the explanation went. The air of the outer chamber held the coming and going of thousands of years: people had gone in and out, fires had burned, breath had gathered and dispersed. The air here had never moved. More settled, heavier; it carried the unstirredness of places that have been long alone. And as Farah stepped in, something in her gave a warning.

This feeling was hard to describe. It did not resemble fear; more a melody heard years ago in some wholly other place, whose when and where had been forgotten; familiar, but a familiarity that cannot be traced to its source, only felt. She could not find its name.

She held her helmet lamp to the walls.

On the chamber's opposite wall, a ring some three metres across.

Its rim was black, its interior black too — but these two blacks were not the same. One was the colour of something burned, accumulated over centuries; the other mineral, far older, the colour of something ancient. Like two separate tongues of the same shade.

Her first thought was the soot left by fires lit at the same spot for years. It was normal in caves; fires lit for light, for warmth, for rites, leaving over time a ring-shaped mark. The form was not quite perfect, but it was plausible.

"It could be a fire mark," someone behind her said.

Yalçın had crouched and was examining the lower part of the wall and the floor. He did not answer.

Inside the ring there were handprints. Dozens. Pressed in red ochre, by the negative technique — the same method, the same pigment, to all appearances the same technique as those outside. But their colours were different; darker, denser, as if less worn than the ones outside. This was a contradiction: what is less worn would normally be more recent, yet there was no sense of recentness in the prints here.

The sizes were different; some long and broad-fingered, from a large body, some smaller, of medium build. But there was one thing common to all of them: each was deliberate. As though those who left them had stopped and chosen this spot.

She wanted to reach out and touch. She did not reach out.

As Yalçın was collecting a sample, the device's screen showed an unexpected value — a few metres outside the ring and around the measurement area, an anomaly, faint but above zero. It was not exactly an energy reading; it was something outside the standard values. He wrote two lines in his notebook, put a question mark beside them. For now it could wait.

When the break came Farah went out of the cave and sat on a flat stone near the entrance. Part of the team had gone down; Yalçın had stayed inside to go over some notes. The sun was not yet quite overhead; the stone had warmed a little, it could be sat on. She took bread from her bag and looked at the mountains as she ate.

She was holding her phone, not out of curiosity but out of habit. She looked at her messages. Two were work, one from Kerem. Before she could open it the phone buzzed — a video call. She looked at the screen. She drew a deep breath and then accepted.

Kerem looked tired. In the background a familiar kitchen — their own kitchen, their own light. On his face was that expression she had been seeing for weeks; an expression caught between saying a great deal and saying nothing, not knowing what to do.

"How are you?" he said.

"I'm fine. You?"

"We've been busy. Ada got a bit sick, she's fine now though."

Farah sat up. "How sick? A fever?"

"Mild. I took her to the doctor yesterday. Don't worry, she's fine now, she even went to school today."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice came out a little harder than she'd meant. She noticed, but did not soften it.

“It wasn’t a big thing. I’m telling you now, aren’t I.” A short silence. “When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Farah.”

“I don’t know, Kerem. The work is still going on.”

He seemed not to know what to say — an expression familiar for years. Lately the conversations between them usually ended this way: in the middle of something, unfinished. Neither a quarrel nor an understanding; only half-sentences and the silence they left.

“Is Ada with you?” Farah said.

Kerem turned and called back. Footsteps came, as if running. Then a small face appeared on the screen: five years old, having taken something from Farah’s hair; the same red but lighter, finer. On her cheek was a crease, whether left from sleep it was hard to say.

“Mama!” Her voice opened all at once, spreading across the whole screen, it seemed. “Where are you?”

“I’m in the mountains, sweetheart. By the big caves.”

“Are there dragons inside the caves?”

Farah laughed. A real laugh, one that came of its own accord, not laboured into being. “I haven’t seen one yet. If I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Ada told her things — what had happened at school today, who had done what, that she had drawn a picture, what was in the picture. Farah listened. As she listened she did not take her eyes

from that face for even a moment; there were no mountains, no cave, even Kerem had gone invisible in the background. Ada talked and talked, and Farah listened.

When the call ended she looked at the screen for a while. Then she put it in her pocket, ate the rest of her bread, stood up. Going back in, she paused at the cave's mouth. She looked into the darkness — something seemed to be waiting there; that was the feeling. She did not know what it was waiting for. She went inside.

As the afternoon wore on the results from the outer chamber kept coming. Six thousand years. Seven thousand. Eight thousand. Regular, consistent, expected. Cemil cleaned behind an outcrop, Kemal logged the records. It was a normal afternoon.

Farah stayed in the deep chamber. She was looking at other places, examining other handprints, but she did not move away from the ring.

Yalçın processed the samples systematically. He labelled, entered, waited. Each step had its order, and that order was not broken. He knew Farah was watching. He never looked.

When the results began to appear Farah was at the far end of the chamber. Yalçın only said her name — not loudly, just enough. Farah came. Yalçın turned the screen.

The number stood there. Plain, clear, seeming to invite no argument.

445,000.

Farah looked. Then at Yalçın. Then back at the screen.

"This is an error," she said.

"The ones outside came back at eight thousand. Same equipment."

“But the oldest known handprint is seventy thousand years old.”

Yalçın did not answer. He took the device, deleted the result, started the analysis again. While it ran neither of them spoke. Sounds came from the outer chamber — Cemil said something, someone laughed. They were normal sounds; but they struck the ancient reality of the chamber they were in and bent, losing their meaning.

The screen returned. 445,000.

He ran it a third time. Farah was no longer watching.

445,000.

He set the device down slowly.

After that, nothing happened. This was the thing that would catch in Farah’s mind later — that the moment had felt not like a dramatic rupture but like a flat, silent door. No noise, no collapse, no outcry. Only that number, and the silence between the two of them, and the dozens of hands inside the ring.

Farah turned to the ring and walked. She stopped at the distance where one step more would have touched it with her hand. Her helmet lamp lit the handprints.

Who was on this land 445,000 years ago?

Science gave a clear answer to that: there was no being capable of leaving a handprint, capable at this scale of producing a conscious, systematic mark. Homo sapiens was still more than a hundred thousand years off. The beings of that time used tools perhaps, knew fire perhaps — but dozens of hands pressed into a cave wall within a ring, with an order, with an intention, was another thing. The mental capacity that required, the capacity to

make meaning, did not enter the picture of that time. Science was clear.

And yet here they were.

Farah raised her right hand. Toward one of the prints at the heart of the ring — she hesitated, then reached out slowly, without deciding. Her fingertips stayed a few centimetres clear. She guessed the size of the hand that had left it by eye; a little larger than her own, the five fingers clearly distinct, a right hand, the thumb on the left. The fingers slightly apart, pressed full to the stone, complete.

Who had pressed this? With what intention, with what thought, why exactly inside this ring?

She did not touch. She lowered her hand slowly.

Yalçın came up behind her and stood at her side. For a long while neither of them spoke. Two helmet lamps lit the ring and the hands within it. Farah could not know whether Yalçın had arrived at the same questions — but they were looking at the same place, and for now that was enough.

Someone from the outer chamber came to the mouth of the cleft. “Just checking, are you all right?” he said.

“We’re fine,” Farah said. “We’re coming right out.”

The man turned away. Farah looked a while longer. Then she turned and walked. Passing through the narrow cleft, the rock pressed her shoulders again; she paused a second, ran her hand over the stone. Then she came out.

By the time they came outside the sun had dropped; the light came in more slanted now, lengthening the shadow of everything. The team was packing up: bags, equipment, the day’s notes. Farah helped someone carry a crate.

Then her eye caught on the tree line. Thirty, forty metres off, at that blurred boundary where pine mixed with oak, for an instant she saw something. A silhouette — or thought she did. Motionless, among the trees, seeming to watch. It could have been a shadow thrown by the light; an animal, too. At these altitudes wild boar appeared now and then.

She blinked. She looked. Nothing. Only trees; though there was no wind, the leaves seemed to stir faintly.

“Are you ready?” someone beside her said.

Farah turned. “Yes.” As she walked she looked once more that way. She saw nothing again.

On the path the rest of the team walked ahead; Cemil was telling some story, Kemal laughing at a point in it. Farah and Yalçın hung back. A long silence settled between them. When the path came out of the trees and opened onto the valley, the spine of the Taurus showed entire. Farah stopped, looked. Without noticing, Yalçın went on a few steps. Farah kept her eyes on the ridge a while longer, then walked.

“There’s a chance it’s the equipment,” Farah said after a while. In a low voice.

Yalçın turned his head. “I ran it three times.”

Farah said nothing. They walked.

They had dinner. Cemil offered everyone some of the sourdough bread he had brought from the village. There was talk; ordinary talk, coloured with fatigue. Someone asked what the weather would be like tomorrow, someone else answered. Someone made a joke, the others laughed.

Farah picked listlessly at what was on her plate. Yalçın finished his meal; mechanical, measured, rigid. At one point Kemal turned

to Farah to ask about tomorrow's schedule. Farah answered. But those words simply flew out of her mind; afterward she could not remember at all what she had said.

After dinner everyone moved to the common room. Farah excused herself and got up. Yalçın had already withdrawn into his own shell. Moving through the dimness of the corridor, Farah saw light seeping from under his door. She went into her own room.

Her room was small; a bed, a desk… The window looked outside, but the mountains had been lost in the dark of night. She threw herself onto the bed with a kind of vehemence and gazed at the ceiling.

445,000 years.

Even to think of the number felt strange. The mind could compute it — it was only arithmetic, it could be done, but truly to feel it was another thing. Eighty years was a span the eye could picture; eighty thousand years was nearly impossible to grasp; 445,000 years was by now only a number — beyond number, carrying no real weight in the mind; it could not hold a time that old.

The feeling that had begun as she entered that deep chamber, the thing that had sharpened as she neared the ring, that definition she still could not name. The number did not explain it. The number could not even come close to it.

Ibn Arabi had said this: every thing had an eternal essence in the divine consciousness, it was there before matter too, it did not perish. The aʿyān al-thābita — the fixed essences, the eternal traces. Everything that exists was somewhere even before it came to exist. The hands in that ring too. And those who left them. Before they came to matter, before they were pressed into the rock, long before time could contain them, they were somewhere.

But who were they? What essences were these? Which aʿyān al-thābita's matter had been made manifest in that ring?

She had no answer to this question. Perhaps it would clear up when morning came, she told herself — and she knew, too, that this was an empty consolation; morning did not answer the things that had no answer. Still, she wanted to keep her mind on this search a while.

She raised her right hand in the dark. She held it before the ceiling. Five fingers, slightly apart. The way she had placed it right beside the hand in the cave. A different hand, a different time, but the same gesture.

She lowered her hand. Ada came to her mind suddenly — that small face, the way she said, "Promise?" She smiled in the dark. Then the smile faded.

Sleep came late. It did not stay long.

Light seeped from under the door of the room at the end of the corridor until three in the morning.

Yalçın was at his desk twenty minutes after dinner. The laptop was open. The analysis data had been transferred, the photographs lined up. The first tab was the Sumerian chronology, the second Mesopotamian archaeology, the third ancient texts.

Zecharia Sitchin was controversial — in academic circles he had largely not been taken seriously; this was known. But to be controversial was not to be wrong; it was important to keep that distinction. The primary sources Sitchin drew on were real: the Sumerian King List, the Atrahasis epic, the Enuma Elish and other clay tablets. These could not be disputed. What was disputed was the interpretation. And in that interpretation, according to those sources, the figure pointed to as the date of the Anunnaki's coming

to Earth was 445,000 years ago. Yalçın had seen this on the margins of another project, made a note, and gone on his way.

Now that note was in front of him.

He opened the fifth tab. The paper he and Tarık had written. After the six months of work at Göbekli Tepe, in a small office, over a great deal of data. The bag motif. Sumerian, Olmec, Egyptian, Indian, Maya. There was no known cultural contact among them; the geographic distances, the time periods, and the travel conditions known in that age made cultural transmission impossible. The mathematical analysis was clear: for such a specific form to recur so consistently across such separate geographies could be coincidence, but the probability was small. They had written their conclusion carefully: "It points to a common source not yet defined by current archaeological models." They had said no more. At that time there was no ground for saying more.

Now he looked at the Sumerian figures. Hundreds of reliefs and seal impressions — in each of them that object. A vessel held to the side, gripped tightly. They carried it in their hands. They took it everywhere they went. In the paper they had studied this object, analysed its form; they had not asked what was inside it. Now he was thinking of that question.

That morning Tarık had called. "Has anything unusual come up?" he had said. It was an ordinary colleague's question; it was always asked in field talk. "Not yet," Yalçın had said. It was not quite a lie either — at that moment the analysis results had not come in. Now, though, he was face to face with that unusual thing.

He returned to the photographs. The hands in the ring. Their sizes, their distribution, the way they had been pressed. Regular. Conscious. Left in order to last.

He opened the paleontology timeline. 445,000 years ago: Homo heidelbergensis. Tool use present, control of fire likely. No record of systematic symbolic thought. Dozens of hands pressed deliberately into a geometric form on a cave wall did not enter this picture. Science did not accept this conclusion; it had strong reasons not to.

He turned to the Anunnaki. The definition: those who came down from the sky, those of exalted blood — it varied by interpretation, and which was the more correct was disputed. The texts that say they came 445,000 years ago. The texts that tell of their doing genetic engineering, of their creating a mortal labouring race. Epic, mythological, controversial — but beneath all these qualifications, the primary sources still standing there.

He sat motionless a long while. The only thing moving was the thumb of his right hand; it pushed and turned the ring on his index finger, tick, tick, without his being aware of it.

At 03:47 the screen was still on. In the upper left corner, 445,000. In the other tabs, the Sumerian figures, the bag paper, the paleontology timeline, the Anunnaki chronology. All of them were looking at one another.

Yalçın turned to the photographs once more. The hands inside the ring. Their sizes, their postures, their distribution.

There was no one else in the room. He did not call out. He said nothing aloud.

But in the very centre of his mind, in that silent moment when everything fell into place, as he looked at those hands sealed into a cave wall in the foothills of the Taurus 445,000 years ago:

This is you.

II. Ether

The pension owner did not know that Farah smoked. She was not entirely in agreement with herself about why she hid it; perhaps she did not want to be judged, perhaps she only wanted those ten minutes on the night balcony to stay her own — something she felt no need to explain. The habit had begun anyway when she woke each night around two or three; her sleep would break, she would toss a while, then get up.

When she stepped onto the balcony that night she noticed the air had turned cold. The pension's wooden balcony rail felt damp to the hand; winter was coming, and to this side of the Taurus it came early. The Taurus was silent in the dark; the mountains were not visible, but knowing they were there was enough — she knew this feeling, the weight of things whose presence you know not by sight but by something else. She lit her cigarette. The flame lit her face for a few seconds, then went out. From far off came the sound of a dog, short and single, then it cut off. The rest of the night was silent.

She came out onto the balcony really to see the moon; but that night the sky was quite overcast. Hoping it would emerge from behind the faint clouds, she drew on her cigarette.

Then, suddenly, a little light. A witness in the sky that made one forget the balcony one had stepped onto. For an instant they looked at each other like two strangers; it kept the secret of the heights above; Farah, the secret of where her mind had gone. She did not know how many times over this had been their acquaintance — but each time it was as if for the first.

The sky was perhaps the sanctuary, and the fairest solace, of souls fleeing the chaos of the earth. And the moon, to her, was the fairest part of the sky. She was a selenophile — the name given to those who love the moon. Its root was Greek, in two parts: Selene, the moon goddess and the moon itself; philos, one who loves. Farah

had come across this word years ago, at university, in the margins of a mythology class, and had shivered with a strange familiarity — because its root was the root of her own name. Her middle name was Selen; her mother had given it only because she loved the sound, without thinking much about its meaning. Yet Selen came from Selene, the moon goddess. After that class Farah had been drawn into the tangled stories of the Greek gods and had finally, from the tip of her own name, arrived at that silver goddess. After that day, to look at the moon was like looking at the root of her own name; both were fed from the same source.

One of the room windows facing the corridor was still lit.

Yalçın's room.

She stopped. There were movements behind the glass — the pale blue reflection of a computer screen, its frame shifting now and then. There were no footsteps, but the faint creak of the desk chair was audible from time to time. Farah let her cigarette smoke out slowly.

Yalçın had gone after something. She knew this. A person losing themselves into the night had its own particular look: the head bowing forward, the movements slowing, the rest of the world growing faint. Yalçın was inside that now. Farah watched it once more, doing nothing else.

She stayed on the balcony a few more minutes. She finished her cigarette, shut the balcony, and went into her room without even turning on the light. She lay down and looked at the ceiling. The pension's ceiling was plaster, its corners yellowed; it had no central lamp, only a corner light — and she had turned that off too. At night this room sometimes felt cramped to her; it was not the walls closing in, it was that the thought inside her had nowhere to go. 445,000. Yesterday, seeing it on the screen, she had felt

something she still could not name — it was not astonishment, nor fear. It was something that came from deeper. Familiar.

She could not sleep for a long while.

At breakfast Yalçın came a little later than usual. When he sat at the table there was a faint mark under his eyes — that sallowness particular to sleeplessness. Farah did not ask. She already knew; there was no need to ask.

He took tea, put cheese on his bread. Farah was holding her glass.

A long silence passed. This one was different from the silence outside. Outside the morning birds had begun, an engine sounded far off — the rhythm particular to that morning hour of village life. But at the table, between these two people, there was a silence of another kind; the kind where one of them has something to say, and the other knows it and is waiting.

Then Yalçın said: “Anunnaki.”

Farah did not set her glass on the table. She waited.

“445,000 years.” Yalçın was not looking at the paper in his hand, he was looking at a point on the table. “The Sumerian King List and the other clay tablets place the date of the Anunnaki’s coming to Earth at this figure. Sitchin is controversial, but the sources are not. And the paper Tarık and I wrote — the bag motif. The thing they always carry in their hands in the Sumerian figures. The thing they take everywhere they go.” He stopped. “The owner of that hand in the ring is not human.”

Farah looked at him. Then she thought of the ring — the handprints, their sizes, that deliberate press. Science said there had been nothing capable of doing this 445,000 years ago. Now Yalçın was saying that that nothing was, in fact, a something.

Something settled quietly into place inside her. There was no surprise — the absence of surprise was itself like a surprise. As if somewhere she had already known this; on the nights she had thought about the aʿyān al-thābita, on the matter of things that were there even before they came to be, she had always circled the edge of this question.

"When did you find this?" she said.

"Last night."

Yalçın said nothing more. He did not go on, did not elaborate, did not see the need. He had said the thing he had to say; the rest was unnecessary.

Farah took her tea, looked outside. The trees stood in the morning light — not quite motionless; the leaves seemed to breathe faintly, there was no wind but a vibration particular to life. Hands that had waited on this wall for 445,000 years. Perhaps everything was already somewhere, only waiting to arrive.

The full report came before noon.

Yalçın took his place at the head of the table, laid out the pages. The report was twenty-odd pages; standard archaeological analysis format, headings, tables, footnotes. The dating results were in the third section. Yalçın did not go there first — he started from the beginning, advanced in order. Farah sat at the next table, looking at her own notes. With half an eye she watched Yalçın — turning pages, moving section by section.

At one point Yalçın stopped. He read something on one of the pages, went on.

Farah got up. "May I see?"

Yalçın held out the page.

Beneath the dating data there was a note written in small type. At the coordinates of the ring, it stated, the measuring equipment had recorded a signal outside the standard values. Its source could not be defined, could not be categorised; in the report's footnote it had been passed over with the phrase "unknown energy residue."

"Did you see this?" Farah said.

"I saw it." Yalçın went on turning the pages. "It could be an equipment problem."

Farah went on holding the paper.

In the afternoon Yalçın had sunk into the tables. Farah busied herself a while with her own notes, then got up and went over to him.

"I'll carry on today," she said. "You go and rest a bit."

Yalçın lifted his head. He looked at Farah, then smiled faintly.

"Would you like coffee?" he said.

Farah turned and went to her desk. She straightened the pages in front of her, took up her pen. She wrote nothing. A little later the smell of coffee spread through the room — it came from the pension's small kitchen, real coffee, the machine's brief sound had been heard. Farah looked at the tip of her pen.

Yalçın came with two cups. He left one on his own desk. The other he set on Farah's desk — not to her right, to her left. On the side that did not hold the pen, the side from which she always took her cup.

He did not say where he had put it, or why he had put it there. There was no need to say it; the place he had put it said it. Farah took the cup but did not drink at once. She said nothing; she did not thank him either — a thank-you for something this small, this

fitting, would have made it larger than it was. Yalçın had already gone back to his desk.

“You were going to rest,” Farah said.

“I am resting,” Yalçın said. Without lifting his head.

Farah turned back to her pages, took up her pen but wrote nothing. Her eye slid to him — and this time it did not just slide, it stayed.

The thumb of his right hand was pushing at the ring on his index finger. Slow, regular, unaware — tick, one edge; tick, another edge. Farah knew this motion. It began when Yalçın came to the mouth of a pattern; as his mind turned around something, his thumb turned the ring. The more the ring turned, the more Yalçın subtracted himself from the room. Right now there was the desk, the tables, and a turning square; nothing else.

The ring was square; this was no coincidence. A round ring would slip and slide on the finger, give nothing to hold; but the square had four edges, and the thumb could press one and tip it onto the next, with one hand, one motion. As if counting. Like a prayer-bead string, but with no beads, no prayer — only four edges and a thumb tipping them in turn. In Yalçın’s hand it was an instrument; the silent relative of the calculator.

He wore his usual leather jacket. Farah had rarely seen him take it off; in the field, at the desk, at dinner — it was almost a continuation of his skin by now. The jacket had seven pockets, outside and in; Farah had not counted, but she knew Yalçın was never once mistaken about which pocket held what. When something came to his mind his hand went to the right pocket, drew out the folded paper, added something if needed, put it back. Each paper had its place. The order inside him seemed not to fit in his head; the excess had spilled onto his body. The hand that strung

lines and divided the cave into grids had divided his body the same way.

He was a built man of about one metre eighty-two; and yet his frame seemed to come after his mind. His beard was forever neglected; in Yalçın's day every task had its order, but the shave's turn somehow never came. He was thirty-seven years old. If she had to describe him, Farah would count three things: the jacket, the beard, the square ring on his finger. A fourth would not come to mind, nor was it needed.

He could not read people. The half-expressions on faces, the intention behind a glance, the unsaid beneath the said — those signals that others picked up without any effort, he could not pick up; to him they were all noise, a hum whose meaning could not be drawn out. But numbers spoke. Tables, sequences, recurring forms — these had a language, and Yalçın knew that language like a mother tongue. He had been diagnosed with autism as a child. Farah never thought of him through that diagnosis; the only thing she thought was: others held the world by sensing it, Yalçın built it by pattern.

Thirty-seven years — and he had never married. He did not carry this like an emptiness; Farah had not once seen that emptiness in him. It was as if his life were written in another language, the kind that loses its meaning when translated — he was bound to his work, his archive, his square ring, his seven pockets. There was nothing missing there; because that life was complete in itself.

Farah looked at her cup. Under her left hand, exactly in its place.

The man who could not read people had read her.

The one exception.

In the days that followed, Farah's desk changed.

First that page of the analysis report came out, its edges scribbled on. Then a notebook — small, black, its cover a little worn. Then a printout of an article on Tesla's 1899 Colorado Springs experiments. Then something else, and then something else again.

In the evenings her desk turned into an island under the lamp. The rest of the team would withdraw, the common room would empty, and Farah would stay: open sources, half-read pages, the small marks she drew in the margins. She was reading Tesla now; before the ether, the man himself. That year in Colorado Springs: a man who worked through the night, who said he was listening to frequencies the world did not hear. She stopped at a sentence, read it again, underlined it. Then, without setting down her pen, looking not at the paper but at the air, she murmured to herself:

"What did Tesla see that no one else could…"

She had not thought what she said would be heard. The room was as good as empty.

"Three, six, nine."

Farah turned. Yalçın was at the far end of the room, at his own desk, bent over his own work — he had not even lifted his head. He had been listening. He always listened; even in the moments you thought he was not, some part of him stayed open.

"What?" Farah said.

Yalçın did not answer for a moment, then set down his pen — for him to set down his pen meant beginning something.

"Tesla's obsession. Three, six, nine. He is said to have called it 'the key to the universe' — there's no proof that line was really his, it was probably invented later. But the numbers are not invented." He stopped, but he had not finished; this rarely happened, his

stopping mid-sentence and yet going on. “Double by two: one, two, four, eight, sixteen… add the digits, reduce to a single digit. It keeps turning round but never touches three, six, or nine. They are a separate family, outside that sequence. Tesla did not take this for mysticism; he saw a pattern. A pattern is not mystical. It is only not yet explained.”

Farah had set down her pen. She had not noticed when.

Yalçın lifted his head, looked at her a second. He was about to say something more — his lips moved, the rest of the words were coming — but he gave it up.

“Anyway,” he said. “I won’t muddle your head.” He turned back to his own page.

The room fell silent again. Farah did not stir for a while. What he had said — that numbers had their own family, those left outside the sequence, a not-yet-explained pattern — were not her words but they were her sentence. The same thing, from a wholly different language. Yalçın saw a number sequence; Farah, from the very start, saw an order that stood unseen revealing itself. Both were looking at the same place, through different windows.

She took up her pen late. And when she did, she did not return at once to Tesla’s page.

Ether. Tesla had believed in it — an ancient, invisible ground that fills the universe and passes through everything. Not matter, but the very thing that gives rise to matter. In the nineteenth century physics had taken it seriously; the Michelson-Morley experiment had tried to measure it in 1887, and had not found it. Science had rejected it.

But Tesla had not let go. He had argued that energy could be transmitted across infinite distances, that empty space was not in fact empty — and quantum physics, a century later, had voiced

something similar by saying “vacuum energy,” in other words, with other mathematics.

As she read the pages Farah jotted a note in her notebook: Space that appears empty is in fact full of energy.

She underlined it. She waited.

For a moment she set down her pen and looked out the window. Tesla’s ether and Ibn Arabi’s aʿyān al-thābita were not, for Farah, two separate things; they were one thing said in two different languages. The ether was that invisible ground filling the universe from end to end — the thing the physicist sought beneath matter. The aʿyān al-thābita was that single, undivided consciousness in which everything stood even before it came to be. The two overlapped in Farah’s mind: the universe was a single consciousness, and the ether was the face of that consciousness where it met matter. The void was not void, because no place could truly be empty; every point was full of that single consciousness, full of it. Matter was only the places where that consciousness thickened and became visible. Everything else — space, time, the between of the two — was the same consciousness in its rarefied state.

A day later, another note: When space-time bends, what happens to that energy?

She did not wait. She already knew.

It leaves a trace.

In those days Farah had forgotten the rest of the world. By evening she would not remember what she had eaten that morning, she would drift off in the middle of a conversation; her mind was constantly on Tesla, on the ether, on the ring, somewhere else. Her body was at the pension, she was not.

One evening Uncle Fahri warmed soup for them — unbidden, unasked. It was late, the kitchen had long since closed, but Uncle Fahri would notice those who worked late and prepare something; it was the quiet habit of a man past sixty, the smile never leaving his face, who had never in his life wounded anyone. He set the bowls on the table, said, “Enjoy,” and withdrew.

Yalçın ate. Farah ate — without noticing that she ate, but she ate. Then Yalçın reached for his pocket, to hold out the money. His pocket was empty. Farah looked too; she had not brought any with her either, her mind had not been on her wallet for days.

“Uncle Fahri, the money—”

“Leave it now.” Uncle Fahri waved his hand, his smile widening. “It’s on us today, it’s nothing.” He said it as if something arguable had been raised and he were closing it; politely but firmly. He did not even look back again; he stepped behind the counter and dried a glass.

Farah looked at him a moment. Around this man everything softened: voices dropped, people were at ease beside him, no one asking why. There was still such a thing in the world: unrewarded, without cause, simply good.

Then that thought too passed, like everything. Her mind slid again, went off — ether, trace, ring. She had to set down somewhere now the thing she was carrying. To tell someone.

It was after dinner when she told Yalçın this. The rest of the team had dispersed. The common room had emptied; a tea glass someone had forgotten stood on the table, the light was a little low. Farah sat at the table, Yalçın across from her.

“The energy residue in the ring,” she said. “It’s not an equipment error.”

Yalçın waited.

“When space-time breaks, the ether leaves a trace. Something opened there, and closed — and that trace stayed. The stone protected it, kept it, for centuries.” She stopped. “That’s why it showed up in the report.”

Yalçın did not answer at once. Then:

“Ether is a dead concept. The nineteenth century. Michelson-Morley tried to measure it a hundred and forty years ago, didn’t find it, and physics buried it.”

Farah said nothing. She waited; she knew that when Yalçın began this way he did not finish at once.

“But,” Yalçın said. One word, then he fell silent — as if weighing the word. “The residue in the report is real. I looked too, three times. It’s not an equipment error; it doesn’t settle onto a mineral, or radiation, or the background. And the thing you call void is not in fact empty. If something bends it enough, an imprint is left behind — a measurable imprint. The curve straightens afterward, but it remembers having bent.”

His finger touched the ring once, as he did while thinking. He looked at Farah, then at a point on the ring.

“What you call ‘the ether leaves a trace,’ in my language is this. The memory a bending thing leaves behind.”

Farah was watching him, motionless. Yalçın did not speak this long; and when he did, most of the time he stated a conclusion, not the course of it. Now he had stated the course — and the course came out at a place Farah had known for years. Through a different door, but into the same room.

Then Yalçın withdrew, as he always did.

“But that’s all,” he said. “An imprint is one thing. ‘A dimensional gate opened’ is another. Even Tesla believed in his ether; he didn’t build a theory of crossing between dimensions.”

“No,” said Farah. “But I’m building one.”

Yalçın said nothing. Farah said nothing either. They both knew that in this moment something had changed — they did not yet know exactly what, but the size of the question had grown. A 445,000-year-old hand. An energy residue that could not be classified. And now this.

Pension sounds came from outside — someone walked in the corridor, a door opened and closed. Normal sounds, a normal night. Yalçın got up, moved to the window. He looked at the dark Taurus; they were not visible, but they were there, they were always there.

A door had opened a crack. What lay beyond was not yet visible.

III. Merkabah

After that night something had stirred between them — unnamed but there. In the days that followed Farah grew readier to approach Yalçın; she came to ask the things she had not asked, to pull at the threads she had left half-drawn.

One evening, after the team had dispersed and the pension's stone terrace had emptied, she pulled that thread with him. The mountains were long since dark; a lamp or two below, an open sky above.

"The hand in the ring is not human," she said. "You said that, and I've carried it ever since. So who were they? What did they leave behind — a handful of handprints, and your bag?" She stopped. "You passed over it at breakfast, you didn't open it. Why always a bag?"

For a moment Yalçın did not lift his head from his page. Then he did.

"We call it a bag because it looks like a bag," he said. "A handle at the top, a body below. Trapezoidal or round. Carried in the hand." He paused. "At Göbekli Tepe there's a pillar. Number forty-three. At its top, three of them, side by side, the same form. Beneath it a vulture, a scorpion. Carved eleven thousand years ago — before Sumer, before writing, before most of agriculture."

"That was your excavation," said Farah. It was not a question.

"With Tarık. Six months. We stood a long time before that pillar." He turned to the page for a second, then back to her. "Then Sumer. Assyria. Wall reliefs — winged figures, sage or god, a bucket in one hand and a cone in the other. They call the bucket a banduddu. They are sprinkling water, purification; that's how it's read. But that bucket, that handle, that bearing, is the same as the form at Göbekli Tepe. There are five thousand years between them. They say bucket, I say bag — a bucket is open, a bag is closed."

“Five thousand years is a lot,” said Farah. “Maybe it’s only a bucket. Everyone makes a bucket — a handle, a body, to carry water. The form follows from the function.”

Yalçın nodded; not to refuse it, but to weigh it in.

“True. Most of my field says the same. A vessel, a practical object. Similar by chance, because the work is the same.” He was silent a short moment. “If only it were so. It would be clean.”

Farah waited. When Yalçın stopped this way she knew it did not mean he was finished, but that the ring was turning.

“But a bucket can’t cross the Atlantic,” he said. “The Olmec. The Maya. The same form — handle, body, held in the hand — in the New World. On the far side of the ocean, thousands of years later, with no contact at all. To invent a bucket is easy. For peoples who had never seen one another to invent, each on their own, the same bucket, in the same hand, in the same bearing, always in the hand of some exalted being — that is another thing.” His finger touched the ring once, as he did while thinking. “It’s in Egypt. It’s in India. Always the same arrangement: a figure, that thing in its hand, held out toward us.”

“How many cultures?” said Farah.

“Enough. If I give you the number you’ll fix on the figure; the matter is not the figure, it’s the distribution. Unconnected points, the same sign.” He tipped another edge with his thumb. “Statistics doesn’t like this. Independent events don’t pile up this far on top of one another. If they do, they aren’t independent.”

Farah said nothing for a while. Then, lower:

“Maybe it didn’t go anywhere,” she said. “Maybe it never travelled at all. If something appears everywhere at the same time, it doesn’t have to have journeyed from one place to another. It was

already there — from the start, everywhere. An image waiting to be seen."

Yalçın looked at her. He did not answer at once. What Farah had said was his own sentence crossed into another language: unconnected points, a common source. He said "source," Farah said "it was there from the start." It was the same thing; and at the same time it was not.

"So what's inside it?" said Farah. "What were they carrying, and for what?"

Yalçın fell silent. This was where the pattern ended — the point where the data ran out, where the handle turned on nothing.

"I don't know," he said. "No one knows. There's a form, no content. It's always held, never opened. A five-thousand-year-old question, and I don't have a single piece of an answer in hand."

He said it and did not withdraw; he only fell silent, honestly, in the place where he did not know.

Farah had listened carefully. She asked nothing more now; there was nothing left to ask, and what remained was not solved by asking.

There was one more thing in Yalçın's head — as stubborn as the bag but quieter. Not only the thing they carried in their hands, but the direction in which they raised their stones also repeated. The circular structures of Göbekli Tepe did not face the sky at random; one reading held that they tracked the brightest star newly rising on the horizon — Sirius. It was disputed, like everything; some say Orion, some say Cygnus. But Giza's three pyramids had brought Orion's Belt down to the ground, and that belt always pointed to the same place in the sky: Sirius again. Hands that had never seen one another, in separate ages, on separate continents, had somehow always turned the stone toward that one corner.

Yalçın had thought of this one night, in the margins of the bag file, and the thought had stopped there, half-finished: perhaps this too was an address. Not the address of where to look — but of where one had come from…

Yalçın turned back to his page. The bag paper was on his mind again — Tarık had raised it on the phone a few weeks ago, had spoken of republishing it. Tarık was in Istanbul around then. Yalçın did not know what he was working on.

Beneath the Grand Bazaar there was another world. Tunnels heaped on one another over centuries, part of them abandoned to their fate, part still in use: the hans of the Ottomans, the Byzantine basements of an earlier time, and what lay below even that was disputed. Tarık had been working in these tunnels for nine months. Together with his team; permits obtained, systematic, an ordinary archaeological documentation: they measured the walls, dated the strata of stone, tried to separate the interlocking layers of the past from one another.

Tarık was as much at ease inside the tunnel as in his own home. He had come out of Yale's Council on Archaeological Studies; he had sat at many tables, from anthropology to art history, and there he had learned to bind disciplines to one another, to look at a layer of stone and see the mystery beneath it. The dark, the narrow, time heaped on time — whatever oppressed others put him at ease.

His hands were clean; too clean for the hands of someone who worked. He loved the earth but did not let it stain him, kept everything in its place. When he spoke he looked at the person before him, smiled, fell silent where he should; everyone on the team was at ease with him. He was someone you got on with, liked, trusted — and this easiness was his most visible side.

But some part of him always stood a little back. Beneath his smile, even in his most sincere moment, there was a thin,

unreachable layer. People did not notice it, and if they did, they put it down to depth. They thought Tarık was deep. They were not quite wrong.

That morning was like every morning. He set up the measuring instruments, gave the team the day's plan, withdrew to his own corner. In the damp silence of the tunnel the hours resembled one another; this was excavation — most days nothing happened, and one day everything did.

That day in the afternoon, examining a wall opening at the far end of the tunnel, Tarık noticed something his foot had touched. He bent down. He swept the dust away with his fingertips. An object — a small geometric form in which two pyramids interlocked in opposite directions. Its size would fit his palm. It refracted light strangely; the angle of refraction was not natural, something no known material would do.

He picked it up off the ground. He paused.

An object this small could not be this heavy. He could barely lift it — as though an invisible load were hidden inside it, as though it were not stone but something denser. He set it down, lifted it again. It did not change. He took it into his bag.

They began examining it at once. The structure of the lens: the base comprised nine, the widest area. The middle layer six — it had grown smaller because it narrowed upward. The top layer three, nearest the apex, the narrowest. One pyramid was made of eighteen lenses in all, in a 3-6-9 form. The second pyramid had been inverted and set inside the first; the four sharp points left outside covered an area of twelve units. The visible total was thirty.

But in the central region where the two pyramids intersected, an area of six units had been compressed inside, folded, condensed — just as a teaspoonful of neutron-star matter carries billions of

tons of weight. This was the secret of alchemy: those six units had not vanished, they had become invisible. This was the source of the lens's extraordinary weight.

The laboratory tests took a week. The result: the material could not be identified. It corresponded to no known compound, its optical properties were outside the standard, its density could not be calculated. The report closed like a technical dead end. Tarık took the lens back.

In the hours when the sun came through the window of the room he would hold the lens up to the light. With nothing between the sun and the lens it refracted into colours like an ordinary prism. But the colours were not ordinary. Unseen shades, things that spilled past the recognised edges of the spectrum. He looked for days.

That afternoon he had opened the window and held the lens to the sun. A pigeon passed over the courtyard — right between the lens and the sun.

And it spoke.

Tarık did not lower his hand. He kept holding the lens, but everything in him stopped for a second. It was a pigeon, it was the pigeon's sound, but there were words — Turkish, whole, intelligible. In the noise there were words.

He lowered the lens. Lifted it again. Another bird passed.

Again.

He set the lens on the desk, stepped back a pace. He looked at the room — walls, desk, books; everything was in its place. Through the window an ordinary Istanbul afternoon could be seen.

He went home.

Three days passed. He did not want to call Nolan — he did not know what he would say. On the fourth day he called.

Nolan answered on the second ring.

“I’ve found something,” said Tarık. “A lens. In the tunnels. When you hold it to the sun the birds… speak intelligibly.”

A short silence.

“Have you tried it on other things?”

“No.”

“Do you have a language you don’t know to hand? Any text at all.”

Tarık looked at his desk. There was a photocopy of an old Aramaic manuscript — left over from an earlier project.

“I do.”

“Hold the page between the sun and the lens,” said Nolan. “Now.”

He set the phone on the desk. He took the lens. He went to the window. He raised the page, held the lens — sun, lens, page, his hand.

And the words whispered — in his own language. The Aramaic signs on the page, passing through the lens, had turned into a Turkish whisper. Slow, clear, intelligible.

He lowered the page. Turned back to the phone.

“Nolan.”

“Yes.”

“It really did it. It did.”

“I know,” said Nolan. “I’ll call you.” He hung up.

When he went home that evening he did not bring the lens with him; he had left it in its place, on the desk, beside the page. But the thing he could not leave was heavier than it, and it came with him.

He got into the shower. He turned the hot water all the way up, bowed his head, let it run. Steam rose, the mirror fogged, the world shrank — a tile, the sound of water, and him.

He did not know what he felt; and not knowing this was not something he was used to either. Tarık always knew what he felt; he was an orderly man, his inside as much in its place as his outside. Now something inside had slipped from its place.

On the one hand, it was right. The kind of thing he had wanted all his life — real, weighty, something that would change the world — had finally come into his hand, and that hand was not any other hand, it was his own. There was a rightness in this, even a completion. One half of him knew this, accepted it, even — with the word he was afraid to say — rejoiced in it.

The other half stood under the water and would not come out. Because he had not sought this. It had happened by accident. A stone had touched his foot, he had bent, he had picked it up; that was all. To obtain the thing you wanted in the wrong way — was it still right, or had it been crippled from the start? And now it was as if he had opened, not willingly but by stumbling, a door from which there was no return.

He turned the water hotter still. His skin reddened. He was no longer washing, only standing under it. Some things did not go with water; he knew this, and still he tried for a while.

Then he turned off the water. Silence filled everything at once. There was nothing left to decide anyway — it had been decided, the moment he picked up the phone. The rest was only consequence.

That night Nolan Voss called his teammates. Archaeologists and scientists from Yale University's Council on Archaeological Studies; for years they had been working on the Voynich manuscript, struggling to crack the language but failing. Nolan told them this: an optical device that translates unknown languages has been found in Istanbul. You need to see it.

The next day the necessary correspondence began. A scientific collaboration protocol, international archaeology agreements — the team passed through the right channels, knocked on the right doors. The process moved forward with surprising speed.

Forty-eight hours later the Yale team — four people, Nolan Voss among them, carrying the permitted original sections of the Voynich manuscript — landed in Istanbul.

IV. Voynich

Tarık had produced an excuse for his workers: a maintenance day, routine cleaning, carry on tomorrow. No one objected. The laboratory emptied.

The Yale team stayed with the lens.

Nolan Voss sat at the table, put on gloves, opened the first page of the Voynich. The rest of the team stood around him in silence. Tarık was by the door, arms folded, watching.

Nolan held the lens over the first line, caught the sunlight.

And it whispered.

Everyone in the room heard it. A single word, in English, clear — because Nolan was holding it, it had come in his own language. One of the team made a note. Nolan moved the lens to the next word.

That was how it began.

The process was slow. Each word separately, the lens advancing line by line. Some pages took hours to decipher. The Voynich's botanical section, its cosmological diagrams, its human figures — all began, little by little, to speak; a five-hundred-year silence was breaking into whisper, passing into notebooks, accumulating.

Tarık was sometimes inside, sometimes not. His task was finished, really — he had delivered the lens, had opened the way. But he could not leave, he kept hanging back.

A few days later, when they reached one of the priority sections in the middle of the book, Nolan paused.

He checked what he had read once more. He took the lens back to the same line. The same words came.

Handprints. Travel through time and space. A dimensional gate.

As the pages advanced, a cave was being described — its walls, its depth, the formations within it. Mountains were depicted. This was a region; particular, chosen, left behind. And the thing that would activate the gate had been drawn: a plant with pointed leaves glowing in two uncanny shades of green, spheres at its roots, two cosmic eyes at its crown.

Nolan set the lens down. He turned to the team. “Record this. Every word.”

Tarık stepped forward. He read the cave’s description — its walls, its depth, the silhouette of the mountains around it. Something crossed his mind. A name.

He turned to Nolan. “This description sounds familiar.”

Nolan waited.

“I have a colleague from Göbekli Tepe. Yalçın. He’s in Mersin right now, working in a cave in the Taurus foothills. It was discovered eight months ago. Tezgelen.” He stopped. “This description is the same place.”

Nothing changed in Nolan’s face. “Are you sure?”

“No,” said Tarık. “But we should look.”

Tarık called Yalçın that night. A short conversation — they had not spoken in a while. What did you find at Tezgelen, what are the descriptions of the cave, tell me a little. Yalçın told him; briefly and to the point, in his particular way. Tarık listened. He hung up.

He turned to Nolan. “The same place.”

The next morning Tarık and Nolan bought tickets to Mersin. The rest of the Yale team stayed in Istanbul — they would go on deciphering the rest of the Voynich. They would share the results.

Nolan sent a few messages before the flight. Then he put the phone in his pocket, they boarded the plane. The plane left on time.

The journey passed easily. When they came out of the airport the light had dropped and struck at a slant; the seaward side was still warm, and there was a scent of citrus mixed with salt in the air — the harvest was on in the groves. They got into a taxi. The driver was an older, talkative man; he asked where they were going, Tarık gave the name of the village. “The mountain side,” the man said. “It’s cold up there, keep your jacket handy.” Tarık laughed; they talked a little about the road, about the abundance of lemons this year, about a village road that had closed last winter. Nolan looked out the window, silent.

The city fell behind. The road first crossed the plain: lemon groves, the glint of greenhouse plastic, a filling station at the edge, a tea garden. Then it began to climb. Citrus gave way to scrub, scrub to pine; the air cooled, and the scent through the window turned resinous and sharp. The bends grew tighter, the sea appeared and vanished now and then. Above, through the trees, the spine of the mountain emerged.

Tarık found Yalçın in the pension’s small common room. When Yalçın saw him at the door he paused a second — then took him inside. It was like the greeting of people who are familiar but have not met in a long time; short, no unnecessary things said.

Nolan Voss was introduced. “From Yale,” said Tarık. “He works on the Voynich. We’ve found something — it concerns you.”

Farah was there too. Coming in through the door she saw two new faces in the room; she recognised Tarık, looked at Nolan. Greetings, a handshake. Nolan leaned forward, held out his arm.

The shirtsleeve drew back a little.

Farah's eye caught on the wrist — a small, minimal tattoo that looked like abstract geometry. Three crescents, their mouths facing outward, their tips intersecting, an inverted-triangle form. Someone else would have passed over it. Farah did not.

She paused a second. Two seconds.

"I have some work to do," she said. She turned, went out.

That night Yalçın sent a message: "Did Tarık bother you, or were you uneasy?"

Farah looked at the screen for a while. "It's nothing. I was tired. See you tomorrow."

The next morning Yalçın found her before breakfast. He drew her into a corner.

"I know you," he said. "Something's wrong. Tell me."

Farah told him. The tattoo, the symbol, what it meant — Iti Nanna. It was two words in Sumerian: iti, the lunar cycle, the month of the calendar; Nanna, Sumer's moon god. It had passed into Turkish as the Order of the Last Moon — because the moon was both the body in the sky and the unit in the calendar, the name looked both ways at once. Sumerian in origin, a small but very old order; its members carried the symbol in a small, hidden place. Three crescents, in an inverted-triangle form, their tips intersecting.

They had a philosophy, Farah said; one founded on numbers. Three was birth, six death, nine spirit — the sacred mathematics of the divine order, as they saw it. Humanity's spirit was darkening a little more from age to age, and the only purification of this

corruption was for the numbers to be completed anew, to begin again from the very start. Destruction, for them, was not destruction — it was a hand that cleared away the rotted and rebuilt, a constructive force. And so they carried catastrophe not as an end but as a duty.

"Nolan Voss is a member of this order," she said. "He did not come here by chance."

Yalçın listened. What the order believed did not much grip him; a mathematics a community held sacred was, to him, a datum about that community, not about the universe. The numbers were perhaps saying something — three, six, nine; he had seen this in Tesla too — but the word "sacred" found no correspondence in his language. A pattern was not to be worshipped; it was to be solved. And yet, as Farah described it — three crescents, an inverted triangle, the tips intersecting — something crossed his mind; quick, indistinct, of the kind that passes without being caught. A form. He had seen something like it somewhere. Where, when? He could not hold it. He let it go.

"The Voynich connection is real," he said. "The cave description matches. Even without Nolan, we'd have reached the same place."

"I know," said Farah. "But why is he here?"

Yalçın did not answer. They went to breakfast.

The preparations took a few days. Those who had come from Yale, the coordinates, the printout of the image page, the permit correspondence. Farah had told Yalçın about the tattoo; Yalçın had listened but had not been able to hold it, the question "why is he here?" had stayed unanswered, and the work had gone on anyway. The matter had passed between the two of them once and stopped

there. But in those days there was something else inside Farah too: quieter, with no questions, an old thing.

One evening, after the team had dispersed, she went out onto the narrow balcony behind the pension.

She lit a cigarette — one of the cigarettes she showed no one by day, kept for the night. Below, the village was dark; a few lamps, a dog far off. Above, on the spine of the mountains, the moon stood. It was a few days off full; its edge was not yet completed, but it was bright enough to light the sky on its own. Farah looked at it. She always did. The sky, to her, was not an empty ceiling but a face that looked back; to look at the moon was to know one was looked at.

The door opened behind her. It was Yalçın; he had not slept either. He came, leaned on the rail a step away from her. Farah went on watching the moon as she smoked.

"Five hundred years," said Farah. Her voice was low, matched to the night. "Maybe more. Whoever wrote that book described this cave. Its wall, its depth, the mountains around it. When no one yet knew. We found it eight months ago; he wrote it centuries before."

Yalçın said nothing.

"You'd call this a record," she went on; there was no reproach in her voice, almost a tenderness. "A piece of knowledge passed from hand to hand, an image. I know it another way." She let out the smoke, watched it. "That cave was there before we found it. It existed before it was found — unnamed, untouched by light. For a thing to exist, it does not have to wait for us to see it."

Years ago she had given this thought its name; the fixed entities, the things that stand in the knower's keeping before they are seen. She did not say it. Yalçın did not carry those words, nor was there a need.

Yalçın did not reply. But he did not leave either. He looked at the moon, then at her, then back at the dark. What Farah had said was being translated into another language inside him — a thing existing before it came to be, an image written somewhere and waiting. The Voynich was a description. A description was an address. An address was the way to arrive there. Something stirred, slid toward its place, its tip showed.

The thumb of his right hand went to the ring. One edge, another edge — slow, regular, unaware. Farah heard that silent ticking, recognised it without turning her head. If the ring was turning, Yalçın was at the mouth of a pattern, and one could not break in while a pattern was being built. She fell silent. She looked at the moon — it was in its place, pale and calm, the way she loved it.

The ring turned. Yalçın did not speak.

What had begun on the balcony that night gathered the next afternoon at the table. Before him the printout of the Voynich, that plant image; beside it the photographs of Tezgelen. The gate opened with an image — the right picture, at the right moment, and the gate opened onto the address of that picture. On the balcony he had come this far, then fallen silent. Now the rest came.

His thumb went to the ring; it tipped one edge, then the other.

Farah was at the table across from him.

“If an image is an address,” said Yalçın, looking at a point on the table, “it’s a portable address. It can be collected.” The ring turned. “You’d asked. What’s inside the bag. It seemed to have no answer.”

Farah set down her pen.

“Not treasure. Not a tool. Images,” he said. “The bag was an archive of pictures — gate images. Each one a place, a moment, a

gate. They collected everywhere they went; at every stop, one more. What they carried was not gold, not even a map — it was the address of every gate they possessed." He paused a moment. "That's why it's always in the hand. That's why it's the same in Sumer and in the Maya and at Göbekli Tepe. It was their most important thing: the list of all the gates."

Yalçın fell silent; he had said the thing there was to say.

Farah said nothing. She thought of the three-metre ring, that single hand inside it; then of the bag held always the same on every relief, every wall, for thousands of years. Her question had come back, answered this time. What was inside it. Inside it were gates — not carried but already there; and they only gathered them and bore them away.

V. Dimensional Gates

At the dimensional gate they change time and space;

Those who touch the cave wall and bring the image alive in their consciousness are joined to the consciousness of the universe;

They pass into the time and space held in their minds.

Each one who passes leaves a trace upon the wall.

But just as the key to every door is different,

so too the images of these dimensional gates are each different and unique.

Those who do not know the image of the gate by which they came out cannot return;

They are imprisoned in that time and that space.

On the day it was decided to test the gate, the site had grown crowded. Once the first sections of the Voynich were deciphered, the work had ceased to be something two people could carry; the rest of the Yale team that had stayed in Istanbul had come down to Mersin, and two physicists had been sent from Ankara — for the measurement, the recording, the oversight of the activation. That was its official name: measurement. No one said "gate" aloud, but everyone was there for it.

Deniz Korkmaz was the younger of the two; someone who calculated before speaking, who ran each sentence once through his mind before saying it. Emre Çetin was warmer, had taken quickly to the site, carried the measuring instruments like his own children. Patrick Walsh, from Yale, was the man who had written the protocol: cautious, with pages of safety notes; he was the one who objected most, who said most often, "what if the one who goes can't come back."

Because that was the matter: no one knew what would happen. On paper the plan was clean — go, look, return — but off the paper there was no guarantee. They argued; Patrick wanted a postponement, Nolan said calmly that waiting would change nothing. In the end someone had to step forward.

The morning was early. The team had gathered at the mouth of the cave: physicists, archaeologists, those from Yale, Tezgelen's local crew. The printout of the Voynich page was in Emre Çetin's hand; the plant image, the spheres at its roots, the two eyes at its crown. Tarık stood near the wall. Nolan held his notebook.

Yalçın checked the coordinates. The ring was exactly here — the hands within it, the 445,000-year-old prints. Farah stood a little back.

On paper the plan was simple. The same place, fifty years forward — 2076. The moment to go to would be held in the mind,

and the image of the gate to return by would stay the same: the same ring, the same wall. One would enter by the gate one had come out of and come back. Deniz Korkmaz would go, look, and return. A jump of a few minutes.

“Are you ready?” said Emre.

Deniz Korkmaz looked at the image once more, committed it to memory. He held the moment he would go to in his mind — the same mountain, the same chamber, fifty years on. He closed his eyes. He reached his hand to the ring. He touched the wall.

And nothing happened.

Then everything happened.

The ether in the ring first paled, then darkened — a deep, mineral darkening; not fire, the colour of something else. A brief tremor, coming from inside the stone.

Farah’s knees gave. She did not sink to the floor, but she wanted to take hold of something — she leaned against the side wall. Her eyes closed.

She was on the surface of the Moon. A pale, grey, shadowless plain. Farah was walking — no dust rising from under her feet, no sound at all, no air to breathe. She was only walking.

Then the cold of the cave came back. Yalçın was beside her, holding her hand. “Farah.”

She opened her eyes. The vision had not dispersed, it was still there. She remembered walking — but something was wrong. She looked at the vision again, from within. She had not walked. Her feet had not even moved. She had stood motionless; it was not she who was moving, it was the ground beneath her.

Something went cold inside her — a certainty she could not name but did not think herself mistaken about.

“Stop it,” she said. Her voice came weaker than it should have. “Stop this. I feel something bad.”

But no one was looking at her anymore. They were all looking at the ring.

Deniz Korkmaz was gone.

The ether had faded, the tremor had stopped; the wall was once more only a wall. Where Deniz had stood a second ago there was no one.

They waited. That was the plan — he would go, look, return. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Half an hour. Deniz Korkmaz did not return.

Before noon a routine data correction came through from the national observatory — in the Moon’s orbit, at the edge of measurement error, an unexplained deviation expressed in centimetres. No one dwelt on it; it was the kind of noise the laser stations gave off now and then, written off to a calibration error and forgotten.

Yalçın read it. Farah read it. Neither said anything. But the hour at which the deviation was recorded was the hour Deniz had touched the wall — and this, unspoken, stood between the two of them.

At noon they went back to the pension. Below, the team was waiting for Deniz, not yet accepting that he would not return. Farah withdrew to her room. A little later Yalçın came, did not stop at the door, came inside.

“I wasn’t walking,” said Farah. She was looking at the window. “In the vision. I wasn’t walking. I was standing still. The Moon was sliding beneath me — toward somewhere.” She turned to him. “I was standing on it, motionless. And it was going.”

Yalçın was silent a moment. “Be calm,” he said.

“When the gate opens it bends space-time. Like a small black hole. The bending pulls the nearest mass — the Moon. That centimetre in the measurement is this. Expected, ordinary.”

He stopped, but he had not finished. “But this gate has been here 445,000 years. Who knows how many times it has opened, how many times closed. The Moon is still in its place. In one day, in a few openings, nothing happens.” He looked at Farah. “Be calm.”

Farah believed him. Not because she wanted to — Yalçın did not miscalculate, she had known that for years. An invisible weight came down off her shoulders. Her breathing slowed.

For a while they did not speak. Then Farah, her voice lightened, almost with curiosity: “Who do you think used this gate? In all that time.”

Yalçın did not answer at once. His thumb went to the ring on his index finger. One edge, another edge — slow, regular, unaware. Farah fell silent.

She waited a long while. The ring turned, and turned.

“Noah,” he said.

Farah asked nothing. She waited.

“I can’t know,” said Yalçın. “I have no proof. But there’s a description — one everybody knows. A vessel. A flood. A pair of each living thing, until the waters drew back. We’ve read it wrong. We’ve read it wrong from the start.”

“That vessel did not float on water,” he said. “It was on a mountain. The thing described is not wood — it was stone. A chamber, a ring, a gate. To wait for the waters to draw back was to wait not on the deck of a ship but on the far side of the gate. In

another time. In another place. While the flood passed through this world, they were not in this world."

"A pair of each living thing." The ring turned. "No one loaded the animals onto a wooden boat. A pair — the smallest number that suffices to start a lineage again. Male and female, one of each, of every line. This is not a list; it's an archive. A genetic archive. The only reason they are pairs is this."

"And he did not return," said Yalçın. His voice had dropped but it did not stop. "We think he returned. He did not. He thought he would come back by the same image — by the vessel; because it was the vessel that carried him forward. But even that step of a year or two left him off to the side. At the nearest neighbour. Perhaps we were that nearest neighbour." He paused a moment. "Perhaps he tried; the gate opened onto a stranger's world. Perhaps he never tried. He stayed."

"The place he reached was not empty," said Yalçın. He went on in a falling voice. "There were those who had remained — the lesser, the ones further back, the ones who turned away from the brink of catastrophe. He showed them the way. He carried what he knew, set it up, raised it to its feet. One more civilisation upon the fallen one." He stopped. The ring slowed. "What we call ancient knowledge is perhaps this. Something carried from somewhere else." He was silent a moment. "That's why we know his story. We are the branch he arrived at."

His thumb stopped. "A guess," he said. "Not data. But the description holds — it holds from beginning to end."

Farah had not stirred this whole time. The tea had gone cold in her hand; she had not drunk it, nor set it down. There was nothing she had to say — or there was a great deal, and it had all come at once.

Because she had known this for years, in other words. The vessel was the thing that carried what was inside it to the far side of annihilation. That which exists, standing somewhere even before it comes to be; not lost, only awaited. What Yalçın said with numbers, gates, images, was the thing she thought with the aʿyān al-thābita.

"It's entirely logical," she said at last. Her voice was low, almost a whisper. "All of it."

Yalçın did not turn his gaze away at once. "Not all of it," he said. His thumb tipped one edge of the ring, then another. "One thing doesn't add up for me. All those animals. Each kind, a pair. If the gate closes at every crossing, then every pair is an opening. A thousand species, a thousand openings." The ring turned. "That much would bring the Moon down. That very day, on Noah's head. The arithmetic doesn't hold somewhere."

Farah did not set down her glass. She seemed to be waiting her turn to say something she knew.

"But no animal crossed," she said.

"There was nothing to cross. The wolf is not the wolf's body. The body stays here, decays; the wolf is not that. The wolf is the thing that makes the wolf a wolf — it was there before the body, and after it. There's no need to carry it; it is already everywhere. It only had to not be forgotten."

The ring stopped.

For a while neither spoke. Then Farah, in a lower voice: "Noah did not take a multitude through the gate. He took a handful of things — small, complete. 'A pair of every kind' is not the size of that handful; it's its wholeness. It was little but it was not lacking." She stopped. "You call it an archive. I know it by another name. The same chamber; a different door."

Yalçın said nothing. The ring was not turned. The arithmetic did not begin again; there was no longer any need for it to — the missing thing had come from the place the pattern could not enter, and settled into its place.

Yalçın did not stir for a while. Then the ring began to turn again; first one edge, then one more.

“We reached for the wrong thing,” he said. His voice was flat. “The image is a key — but not only of space. The key of the universe and of time; it opens two doors at once.” He stopped. “We chose time. The same place, fifty years forward. But perhaps the one who reaches into time cannot return; time breaks, and perhaps this is the cursed direction.”

Farah waited.

“The Anunnaki knew this,” said Yalçın. “Perhaps they never reached into time; only into space. From one star to another, from one world to another — never forward, only sideways. That’s why the openings never accumulated in any single world, and that’s why they could use the same images. They could return, because they did not break time.” The ring turned. “That’s why the bag was their most precious thing. There was no gold inside it, not even a map — it held the key of every star, every world they could reach. Jumping from place to place, in their own time, never scattering, they became an interstellar civilisation. They turned the key the right way.”

He was silent a moment.

“We turned it wrong,” he said. “And a key turned wrong does not turn back.”

Then Yalçın turned his gaze elsewhere, to the next pattern. Farah went on looking at him. Outside, in the middle of the day, the Moon stood in the sky like a pale stain.

In the afternoon they went back to the cave. Farah did not go back; she stayed outside, refused to go in.

Emre Çetin volunteered. To find Deniz — he would cross, look, and the two of them would return together. The same image, the same moment, the same gate. No one could see anything wrong in this; whoever came out of the same gate entered by the same gate.

He committed the image to memory. He touched the wall. The ether darkened, trembled, stopped.

Emre Çetin was gone.

This time they waited less. They had seen that waiting changed nothing. Emre did not return either.

Toward evening the observatory sent data a second time. The deviation was now far above measurement error — clear, distinct, insistent, and several times the last. “An unexplained anomaly is under investigation,” it said. The tone had changed.

Patrick Walsh read the notice, then looked at the cave. “There may be a problem here,” he said. No one disagreed.

Still he went in. By evening neither Deniz had returned nor Emre; Patrick Walsh went to the wall all the same — perhaps to bring both of them back at once, perhaps to convince himself. He thought of the image. He touched the wall. The ether darkened.

Patrick Walsh was gone.

All three were gone.

There was nothing left to argue. Three people had passed through the same wall, and all three had not returned. And at each crossing, at that very hour, the Moon had deviated a little more: with the first by centimetres, with the second far more, with the third enough to make the measurement screens tremble. The

deviation at each opening was a multiple of the last. It was no coincidence.

The cause had been sought, and found; it was no longer hidden. Each opening left an invisible crack in the fabric of the stone, and that crack tilted the heaviest neighbour — the Moon — a little toward itself. Alone it was nothing; when the gate closed the Moon slid slowly back into place, no trace left. But this time the cracks were opening one after another, piling on one another; none of them left time for the Moon to draw back, and each multiplied the pull further. The danger was not in a single gate but in the repetition — and the repetition had long since passed a threshold.

The program was suspended that evening.

That same night an unusual tide occurred along the coast of Mersin. It was small, local; the news channels covered it briefly. A few boats were damaged in the harbour. It was the first sign — tiny, but it was there.

There was a watch kept before the cave now. The team had dispersed — some had withdrawn to the pension, some were analysing data. Yalçın was looking at the numbers. Farah was beside him, silent, waiting.

Tarık was waiting too, but for something else.

In the back room of the pension, in the dark, he knew the hour without looking at a clock. Three people had already crossed, the Moon had already deviated; the threshold had been parted, and the rest was only to complete it. The number had been a number from the start: three birth, six death, nine spirit. Tonight was six — and six was the name not of the end but of the return.

Yalçın was in the next room, looking at the numbers. Tarık could almost hear him — that silent, ceaseless mind, trying to set everything in its place. He was fond of him. He no longer saw any

harm in admitting this to himself; fondness did not stand against the duty. The months they had spent at Göbekli Tepe, before that pillar, were real. Yalçın's seeing of the bag, his building of the pattern, his saying "this is you" — all of it was real, and all of it had worked. The trace the order had sought for centuries, Yalçın's mind had tracked; unknowing, unwilling, but it had tracked it. The friendship was not a lie. It was only an instrument. The two could be at once; Tarık had learned this long ago.

Yalçın read the universe, he did not read people. He had never been able to read Tarık. That small thing behind his ear he had seen a thousand times and not once noticed. Tomorrow — if there was a tomorrow — perhaps he would remember. But Tarık would not be here by then.

He rose. He took his jacket. There was neither regret in him nor fear; only, far down, something he did not name — the weight carried by one who passes quietly beside a friend's sleep. He carried it. He did not set it down, but he carried it.

After midnight Tarık went out to the front of the cave. He lit a cigarette. Five minutes later Nolan came to his side.

"When will they come?" said Tarık.

Nolan lit his cigarette. "Within half an hour."

The watchman had not noticed the two of them — it was the shift change, a brief gap. Ten people came; silent, separately, from different directions. They had come from the four corners of the world. With Tarık and Nolan they made twelve — six women, six men.

A fire was lit. At the mouth of the cave, small, controlled — from outside it would look ordinary.

The time was exactly 03:06:09.

Sumerian words were whispered.

Nolan took out the copy of the image page. They looked at it in turn, each committed it to memory, then Nolan threw the page into the fire. It burned. It turned to ash.

Inside the cave the ether darkened. A black ring widened, trembled, stopped. The 445,000-year-old silent core of Tezgelen seemed for a second to flicker on and off.

They entered in turn. One by one, they touched the ring, thought of the image, crossed. The gate opened twelve times, one after another, and each opening multiplied the last.

Twelve.

The fire went out. The cave was empty.

This time there was no small tide.

Before morning, the Moon was no longer measured in centimetres. Those who watched the night saw the difference with the naked eye — in the sky, far brighter, far larger than it should be. Twelve openings, one on another, multiplying; the threshold had long been crossed. The Moon was no longer turning in its orbit, it was falling.

At five in the morning the coastal alarms began to sound.

Tsunami warning systems came online across the world. Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Italy, Greece, Turkey. In the harbour of Mersin the waters drew back, then returned — higher this time, faster, and they did not draw back again.

At the pension everyone woke. Phones rang, screens lit, the corridors filled. Farah looked at the news. She did not set down the glass in her hand.

At eight in the morning the reports began to come that millions of people had lost their lives in the tsunamis.

VI. Parallel

Deniz came first.

The gate left him in the deep chamber, alone, and the chamber was no longer that chamber. There was no ether. The ring was cold, dead; a darkened mark at the core of the stone, nothing more. He thought of the image he had memorised, the gate he had come out of; he put his palm to the wall, waited. The wall was only a wall. He tried again, and again, feeling the stone with his fingertips — as if the ether were hidden somewhere and could be found. It did not darken, did not tremble. The gate he had come out of had closed behind him. Understanding this did not take long, but accepting it took far longer.

He stood up to return, headed for the way out — and there was no way out. The narrow cleft they had climbed through was not in its place; or it was, but time had covered it over. Roots hanging from the ceiling had woven a net, and below, earth, stone, rotted logs had piled up and choked the passage. Deniz probed with his torch, probed with his hand; a thin coolness came from somewhere — so the far side was open. But between lay a metre, perhaps two, of earth.

He knew the place; he knew where the passage opened, which way he had to dig. He crouched and began to scrabble with his hands. The earth was damp and cold, packing under his nails; a root tore loose, a stone rolled, ten handfuls of earth ran back for every handful of progress. In the dark, alone, not knowing how much time had passed, he dug.

Then there was a sound behind him. He turned. Emre was standing before the wall — a moment ago he had not been there, now he was; the gate had let him out too, at the same place, a little later. On his face was the expression Deniz had worn hours before: first the joy of finding someone, then, looking at the dead ring and at Deniz's earth-smeared hands, that joy slowly draining away.

They did not speak. Emre crouched beside him, and he too began to dig.

Patrick came last. He appeared before the wall, tried, understood; without a word he came and knelt in the earth. The man who had said “what if the one who goes can’t come back” was now, with his own hands, opening a hole from one world to another.

They dug in turn, one when the other tired; without speaking, because their breath was needed for the digging. At last a hand met empty space — the far side. They widened the hole, one by one, earth-smeared and gasping, crawled to the mouth of the cleft. From outside no light came, only cold air seeped in — the day had long ended; the sun had set a good while ago, and what remained was a bottomless darkness woven by the leaves.

They came out of the cave’s mouth and stopped.

There was a forest.

Where once Tezgelen’s bare, stony slope had been, trees rose — thick-trunked, old, their branches interlaced. There was no path. No camp, no cordon, no soldiers. Nothing touched by a human hand; or there was, but the forest had long since taken it in. Beneath their feet, on the stone they had once walked, the moss was as thick as a cushion.

“Fifty years,” said Deniz. His voice drowned among the trees. “A slope doesn’t become a forest in fifty years.”

No one answered. This was not fifty years on — or it was, and it was some other fifty years on. Through someone’s mind passed that line of the Voynich: *resembling it but not it; the further away, the more different.* They had not come to the place they meant to come to.

They decided to go down. The pension was below, the village was below; there had to be something, someone. They went into the forest.

The descent was hard. There was no path, no direction; there was only the slope, and they followed it. Branches scratched their faces, roots tangled their feet. The air was heavy and damp, it smelled of an old forest — rotting leaf, wet earth, and beneath it another smell they could not name. Overhead the leaves were so dense that in places the sky could not be seen at all.

And it was silent.

Emre noticed it first. A forest was not silent — there would be a bird, an insect, something. Here there was nothing. The wind stirred the leaves, that was all. As though there was a forest but nothing living within it. As they walked, this silence settled on them like a weight; they stopped talking, because in that silence their own voices came out too loud, too alone.

They descended for hours. Or so it seemed to them, for here time seemed frozen. The dark was whole and of one piece; outside the narrow patch their torches touched, the forest was utterly black.

The slope levelled out. Deniz stopped, turned, looked; he tried to hold in his mind the way of that first day, the place of the village, the pension. “Here,” he said. “The pension was here.”

They searched. A wall, a foundation, a heap of stone, a rusted iron — anything to say a human had once been here. Somewhere Emre scraped the moss with his foot; something flat came up beneath it, it could have been concrete or only stone. It was not clear. The forest had covered everything so completely that what was human work and what was nature could not be told apart. There was neither ruin nor ash; it was not fire, not war — they thought this, all three separately, and none of it fit. What had

happened here was not destruction but forgetting. A very long time ago. There were no people. There was no sound. There was no trace.

Patrick said it at last, in a low voice, to no one: “I don’t know what this is.” Once said, it grew heavier still.

The torches were weak; the three of them stood together, their backs close to one another. The cold set in. They could not wait here until morning, but they did not know where to go either.

Then Deniz saw it.

Far off, among the trees, a small light. Not steady — flickering, orange. A fire.

All three looked, a long while without speaking. A fire meant someone. What someone meant, they did not know. But in that forest, in that silence, there was nowhere else to go. They began to walk toward it.

It took about an hour. The fire had looked near, but the forest was deceiving; each ridge they crossed gave onto another, and the light seemed to stay where it was. Sometimes the trees closed it off, and it vanished; then they would stop and wait, hoping it would appear again. It always appeared again. Once Emre thought he heard something behind him — a crackle, a movement. He turned, held up his torch. Nothing. But “nothing” gave no comfort in that forest; it was more the feeling that something had chosen not to be seen. They walked a little faster.

It was past midnight — they did not look at their watches — when they reached the fire.

They stopped at the edge of the clearing. A small fire burned in the middle. Beside it, on a low stone, an old man sat. He seemed to have been waiting for them; or not waiting, only unsurprised by

their presence. He raised his head, looked. His face was very old, but his eyes were open and alert. He did not take fright, did not beckon. He only pointed to the other side of the fire, the empty place: as if to say, sit. They sat.

The old man said something.

What he said resembled no language. It was not Turkish; Deniz and Emre understood that at once. It was not English either; Patrick shook his head. It was something else — flowing, soft, of a very old timbre; the sounds familiar but the arrangement wholly foreign. It seemed not to be a language of this world. Or it was of this world, but not of theirs.

They tried with signs, with sounds, with simple words. The old man listened, tilted his head, answered in his own language. Neither understood the other; the two sides were like two sides of a fire, two sides of a wall.

In the end Emre rummaged in his bag — one of the few things that had stayed on him going into the jump — and took out a small notebook and a pen. He held them out to the old man, made a writing motion with his hand: write.

The old man took the pen, turned it a moment between his fingers — as though he knew the instrument but was not used to it. Then he bent to the page in the firelight and wrote. He wrote slowly. When he finished he held the notebook back out.

Patrick took it, looked. His face changed.

“This—” he said, and stopped. He brought the notebook closer to the fire; his hand was trembling slightly. Emre and Deniz drew near.

The writing on the page was familiar. None of them could read it — but for all that they could not read it, all three had seen it

somewhere. Those curves, those letters joining into one another, fitting no alphabet but flowing with a flawless order all its own.

The Voynich. That manuscript at Yale. Five hundred years old, that no one had been able to crack. The one that described Tezgelen, that described the gate.

What the old man had written resembled it. Not exactly it — resembling it. But enough.

Patrick raised his head, looked at the old man with a new, wholly different question. The old man looked at him; calm, waiting.

But they could not ask. The only thing that could decipher the writing was the lens, and the lens was not here — in another world, another time, left on a desk in Istanbul. The answer itself was perhaps between their hands, on that line, and they could not read it.

The three of them sank down by the fire. The old man watched them, then threw another branch onto the fire; sparks rose, mingled with the dark. They thought of what they would do — there was no way back, no language, no road. There was only a fire, an old man, and a sentence held in the hand and unreadable.

The fire burned. The forest was silent.

Sleep, even when it came, brought no rest. The three sat around the fire, their backs close, their knees drawn to their stomachs; the cold rose from the ground, seeped through their damp trouser-legs, worked into their bones. The fire burned but its heat reached only their faces, while their backs stayed in the night — as if the warmth too were wary of advancing far in that forest. The old man sat on the far side of the fire, on the same stone, motionless; now and then he leaned to throw on a branch, the sparks rose like a handful of

fireflies and mingled with the dark, and then everything returned to that old silence.

Deniz lifted his head to look for the sky, and could not find it. Overhead the leaves were woven so dense that the night was a single piece of darkness; not a star, not a glimmer, only a colourless deepening that passed through where the branches touched. Perhaps it was better so. Not to look up was not to ask which sky they were under, and that night no one wanted to ask that question.

The smell was still there — of rotting leaf, of wet earth, and beneath it the one with a touch of flesh that none of them wished to say aloud. But nothing had any sound. A forest night was not like this; there would be a cricket, a night bird, a branch breaking far off. Here there was only the rustle of the fire and their own breathing. The silence was not an absence, it seemed; more the emptied state of something once full — like that strange, echoing spaciousness left behind by all the furniture carried out of a room.

Deniz leaned his back a little harder against Emre's; the cold came from everywhere except that thin line where two bodies met. Even when he closed his eyes that silence hummed in his ear — like the ear hearing its own sound where there is no sound, a fine, continuous, displaced hum. His mind kept returning to the same place: a few hours ago, in another world, he had touched a wall, and with that touch had fallen here, into these trees, this old man, this nameless night. In between there had been nothing — no road, no crossing, not even a moment. Only the wall, then here. His mind could not fill that gap; each time it slipped and fell from the same place.

Emre, for his part, was counting. He did not know himself what he was counting — his breaths, perhaps, or the cracklings of the fire, his heartbeats; he had always done this when afraid, something left from childhood. Numbers were an order, and order was a rail

to hold when everything around was falling apart. He counted, and counted, and somewhere the counting blurred into sleep.

Patrick did not sleep. His eyes were closed but he did not sleep. He had written the protocol; the pages of safety notes, every contingency, every step of return, he had thought them all. “What if he can’t come back,” he had said, again and again, on that bright day, at the mouth of the cave. No one had taken him seriously; even he, deepest down, had supposed it only a thoroughness, a formality. Now that sentence, those three words from his own mouth, had come back in the night and settled onto his chest. They had not come back. And he did not have the smallest idea of how returning would be done — in none of all the pages he had written.

Weariness took all three in the end, but not into a bottomless sleep; on the surface, broken, starting awake every few minutes. Once, when Emre opened his eyes, he saw the old man still in the same place, in the same posture; he was looking not at the fire but at the dark beyond it, as if there were something there to be seen and only he could see it. Emre slipped back into sleep. The man did not stir.

Dawn broke with a strange herald of light. First the dark thinned; then a grey light tinged with green flowed through the leaves — it was day, but a watered, filtered day, unsure of itself. The three woke almost at the same moment; cold, hunger, and that short, hard sinking of forgetting for an instant where they had come and then remembering.

The old man was already on his feet. He had put out the fire, covered the ashes with earth — the work of a practised hand, done without thinking. He looked at the three of them, then turned to the lower side of the forest and began to walk; he went a few steps, stopped, turned back and made a gesture with his hand: come. No word, no sound, only that hand. The three looked at one another.

There was nowhere else to go; and staying was not a place either. They got up, brushed off the dust and leaf, and fell in behind the man.

They walked. There was no path again, but the old man's feet knew a path: an unseen line known only to him; a line that passed between the roots, beneath the fallen trunks, through the places where the rock seeped water. His foot never caught, never hesitated; in his steps was the by-heart certainty of one who had walked this forest a lifetime. The three followed, snagging on branches, slipping on the damp earth. The dew on the leaves wet their trouser-legs everywhere they passed, and their shoes grew heavy; the forest, from top to bottom, seemed to breathe slowly, leaving on them with each breath a dampness, a coolness, and that nameless smell.

As they walked, the earth softened beneath them. Where they trod sank in, and with each rising step a sharp smell of decay spread into the air — sweetish, heavy, with something else mixed into it. Somewhere Deniz bent and took a handful of earth, crushed it between his fingers; it was black, like oil, and in it not a single stir of life — not a worm, not an ant. The earth was not dead; more, it seemed never to have lived, or to have stopped living so long ago that it had forgotten. He shook out his palm, went on walking.

The air was warming. At first it was an imperceptible thing — they took it for the cold of the night drawing back. Then something else happened. The trees thinned, the trunks parted, and before them, where the leaves ended, a wall of brightness appeared — flat, white, an almost solid light. The old man stopped right there, at the last step of the forest's shadow; for a moment he bowed his head and waited, as if preparing himself to pass through that wall. Then he drew a cloth from under his hood, wound it around his face, his neck, covered the backs of his hands. He turned to the three, looked at their uncovered faces, their bare hands, could say nothing; he

only raised his hand and pointed to the sun, then to his own covered face: cover yourselves.

They did not understand. It was too late to understand.

They came out of the shadow.

And for the first time, the first time since the cave, they saw the sun.

It was wrong. They understood this not like scientists but like animals, with the skin first. The light was too white — its yellow drawn out, something cold mixed into it, a white too sharp to look at. And its heat was not the soft, familiar heat of the sun they knew; the instant it touched skin it stung like a needle. Within seconds the back of Emre's neck and the back of his hand began to redden; an itching, smouldering redness. Deniz shielded his eyes with his hand, but even the light leaking between his fingers brought tears to them. Patrick let out a curse, low, in his own language; not a word, a reflex, an alarm the body gave.

They drew back — without thinking, their bodies deciding for them, they sprang back into the shade, under the tree. The old man had not waited for them, had not needed to; he had already passed to the next shadow, under a rock outcrop ahead, and was watching them from there. They understood then: the walk was not a normal walk, it was leaping from one shadow to the next; the man knew the way not by the sun but by the shade. They crossed the open places with bowed heads, quickly; they stopped to catch their breath under the tree, the rock, the outcrop. Their skin burned a little more at every open crossing; there was still time to noon, and the sun was already becoming unbearable.

As the way went down, other things began to show beneath the green. Somewhere, under the moss and the ivy, a surface too flat — it might have been concrete, the remnant of a wall. Somewhere,

between two fallen trunks, a bent iron, its colour rusted into the earth. Lower down, in the bed of a stream, a few stones rounded and worn but too even to leave room for doubt — stones once set one upon another, that had been something, then scattered. A human hand had touched these places, but nature had covered that hand so thoroughly that no longer could it be told where the human ended and the forest began. This was not ruin; it was abandonment.

Once, at the edge of a clearing, they met with something else. From under the moss, half-buried in earth, something protruded — a curve, smooth, too even for nature to make. Emre stopped, bent, parted the leaves with his hand. It was a vehicle — or something that had once been a vehicle; the round of a wheel was still discernible, but its body had collapsed, its inside filled with earth, root, darkness. Within, in a corner, there was something smaller, whitened, thin; for an instant Emre took it for bone, then could not be sure, then did not want to be sure. He straightened, drew back. No one said anything. Once there had been someone here; going somewhere or fleeing from somewhere, and halfway they had been stranded — the sun, time, something else, it was not clear. Now the forest had taken them in too, as it took everything, with patience, without haste, without distinction. The old man turned and looked at them, without waiting, then walked on. This was nothing new for him; it was a thing everyone who walked this forest saw sooner or later, then learned not to see.

Toward noon the old man brought them to the foot of a high rock face. The underside of the rock was hollowed — natural or by human hand, it was not clear; a pocket of shadow, a deep recess the sun could reach at no hour. At the back of the hollow were mouths opening into darkness — passages going down, into the underground. And within the shadow, there were people.

At first Emre saw them as movement, not as people; long, robed shapes stirring within the shadow. Then his eye adjusted to

the dark. They were people — but people who had learned over a lifetime to hide from the sun. All wore long, loose clothes covering them head to foot; their faces in the shade of hoods, their hands beneath cloths. Their skin, from the little that showed, was of a pallor that had never seen the sun, an almost bluish white. When they saw the three they did not start, did not take fright, were not even much surprised; they only looked — with the calm of seeing again a thing seen before. The strangers beside the old man were nothing new to them. The ones who came from the mountain. So others had come before; so they were not the first.

From one of those dark mouths at the back of the hollow, from within, came a faint sound — a drop of water, a distant ticking, or the muffled hum that many people make deep down, unseen. So here, beneath this rock, there was far more than met the eye; these few shadows above were only the shore of a whole life that went down below. Emre looked toward one of the mouths; the dark went down step by step, and where the eye reached it thickened utterly. So people were born there, lived there, died there; generations who knew the sun only from tales, whose skin had never burned. Above was only a ceiling to them — a ceiling dangerous to cross, to be crossed quickly. A thing called sky was perhaps no longer even in their words.

A few children, further back in the shadow, huddled together, were looking at the three; their eyes large, their skin that same pale white, motionless. The smallest, half-hidden in its mother's skirt, its finger at its mouth, watched without any fear, without any smile — as though the three were to it not people but the final, face-to-face form of something it knew from tales.

The old man brought the three as far as the mouth of the hollow, then drew back; a little off, in his own shadow, he sat on a stone and returned to that far-looking gaze of his.

Someone came forward from within the shadow. Older than the others but not as old as the old man; in his bearing there was a responsibility, a habit — speaking to the stranger fell to him, clearly. He pushed his hood back a little; his face showed, lined, calm, his eyes of a depth accustomed to the dim. He looked at the three, then, unexpectedly, spoke — and his language was English. An old English, oddly stressed, as if learned from a book, but intelligible.

Patrick, whose English was the easiest of the three, answered. The words came hard from his mouth at first — as if he had not spoken in a long time, though only yesterday he had been speaking; but that "yesterday" was now in another world, too far to reach. The man's name was Sael. He said he was one of his people's "rememberers" — one of those who held the old tongue, the languages the world had known before the collapse. It was a duty for them, he said; so as not to lose the past entirely, so as to be able to tell the newcomers something, someone had to carry it. It was carried from generation to generation, dwindling though it was.

First Sael pointed to noon — the sun was nearly at the zenith. Inside, he said; he wanted them to withdraw into the depth of the hollow, into the darkest part of the shadow. To go out now meant to die; he said it so calmly that it was clear there was no exaggeration. They withdrew.

And there, in the cool of the rock, while the sun scorched the world outside, Sael told it.

The sun was not always like this, he said. Once — in a time he too knew only from tales — it was soft, friendly; people walked beneath it, sowed fields, sat by the sea. Then, generations ago, the sky tore. Sael used that very word: tore. That thin veil over them — the one that held the air, filtered the light, protected them, that invisible curtain — had thinned somewhere, then opened wholly.

After that day the sun came down to the earth as it was, filtered through nothing, naked, and scorched everywhere it fell. First the crops went, he said; then the animals, then the shores of the sea, then the cities. The human held out longest, because the human knows how to dig. And the trees held out, the trees that learned to keep their leaves from burning.

Why, Patrick asked. What happened, that it tore?

Sael was silent a moment. No one quite knows, he said. The old ones tell it three ways. Some say a star fell, a fire came down from the sky. Some say the sun itself sickened, broke from within. And some — here Sael lowered his voice a little, with the voice not of repeating a story but of trying not to believe it — some say people opened something that should not be opened. They opened it many times, and one day the sky could not bear it, they say. But this is a fable, he added; a thing the old ones tell to frighten children. No one really knows. It is very old; none who knew remain.

For a moment the three did not look at one another — they avoided looking. "Something that should not be opened." In a corner of their minds a gate, a ring, a wall stirred, but no one called it forward, no one built that sentence to its end. They were very tired, and some thoughts became real the moment they were built.

Those who were left went underground, Sael went on. First to the caves, then to the deeper places they dug. Above, only the night could be borne now, and even that an ever-shortening, ever-less-restful night. How many remain in the world we do not know, he said; no word comes from far off, and has not for a long time. Once there were sounds heard from across the seas, lights seen; those sounds went out one by one, those lights died one by one. Perhaps we are a million in all, he said; perhaps fewer. Small communities, scattered, unaware of one another; each in its own shadow, its own

passage. We can hardly find one another anymore. The world has grown small — not its size, but the human in it has grown small, and as it shrank it fell silent.

How do you live, Patrick asked; what do you eat, where do you find water. Sael smiled faintly — the smile of a weariness, a habit. The night, he said. Everything happens at night. After the sun sets we go up; we gather mushrooms, pull roots, carry water from the places where rain collects. The rain has lessened in recent years, but it still falls, at night. By day we sleep, deep, in the cool. Everything has turned around, he said; once people lived by day and slept by night — we do the reverse, and we no longer know any other way. The world turned over, and we turned with it.

Outside, at noon, the light was no longer a colour but a force. Looked at from the mouth of the hollow, the world seemed white, shadowless, flat; as though the sun were not merely heating but slowly erasing everything that was. No bird passed, no insect flew; at that hour there was nothing living outside, nor could there be. The three sat in the depth of the shadow, their backs to the cold rock, on the shore of that white hell, and were silent a long while.

And in that silence, something fell into Emre's mind.

He looked at the old man — the man who spoke the Voynich tongue, who knew no other language. Even Sael did not understand him; he was clearly not a part of this collapsed world, not of Sael's people, did not speak their tongue. Then — then what if he too, Emre thought to himself; what if he too is like us? What if he too passed through a gate and fell here, could not return, and grew old here?

Before the thought was even complete his hand went to his bag. He took out the notebook — the one in which the old man had written those unreadable lines in the night. He opened to a blank page, took the pen. And he began to draw the image they had

memorised: that uncanny, pointed-leaved plant, the spheres at its roots, the two cosmic eyes at its crown. The image of the gate.

He rose, went to the edge of the shadow, held the notebook out to the old man.

The man did not understand at first; he looked, at the page, then at Emre's face. Then his eye went down to the drawing and stopped there.

And something happened in that face — slow, then all at once. First a tightening, a recognition; then his eyes filled, fast, overflowing. The old man began to weep — not silently, but like a child, his shoulders shaking, with the sudden release of something held in for years. He stretched out a trembling finger, touched the image in the drawing, touched it, touched it again — as though he had to touch it many times to believe it was real. Then he raised that finger, turned it toward the direction the three had come from, up the forest, to the mountain, to where the cave was. There. From there. I came from there.

This was the only sentence they could share. Without a single word built, without a single sound made; a drawing, a finger, and a direction. But it was complete. All three understood, at the same moment, with the same coldness: this man was one of them. He had passed through the same image, the same gate. Years ago, who knows how many years ago — he too, just like them, had touched a wall, had wanted to go somewhere, and had found himself here, under this wrong sun. And he had never been able to leave again.

Years. Deniz thought of this word, and thinking of it his stomach dropped. Those lines on the man's face, that bowed back, that whitened hair, that trembling hand — all of it was the record of a lifetime spent here, under this wrong sun, in this waiting. They were on the point of being spent before even a single day was out; what if a lifetime were out? Deniz tried to think how many times

the man had climbed to that mountain, how many times he had stood before that wall and seen that nothing happened, and then how many times he had gone back down; he could not count it; the number had ceased to be a thing a person could carry.

No one said anything. There was nothing to say, or rather nothing that would bear saying. Emre took the notebook back; the old man did not want to let go at first, his fingers hung a moment at the edge of the page, then released it. He drew back, returned to his shadow, but he sat differently now — a little more turned toward them, a little less alone.

Patrick, his voice cracking, turned to Sael. That man, he said; that old man. Do you know him? Where does he come from?

Sael looked at the old man, then shook his head. We do not know, he said. We find him at the foot of the mountain sometimes, for years. We cannot speak with him; his tongue is like none of ours, like no one's. We do not know where he comes from, where he goes. We know only this—

He stopped, looked for the right word.

Every day, he said, he goes up. To that old cave on the mountain. He stands there, for hours, doing nothing; he looks, as if waiting. When evening comes he goes down. The next day he goes up again. It was so before us too; our fathers saw him there, and their fathers. We do not know what he seeks. Perhaps he waits for something. Perhaps for someone.

The three listened, and as they listened something settled into place inside them, quietly, irreversibly.

The man who climbed to that cave every day. For years, perhaps for lifetimes, standing before the same wall and waiting. Seeking something, not finding it but unable to give it up. The man

who had brought them to that wall, who had wept like a child on seeing the image they drew.

This was them. This was their future.

Noon passed. The shadows, slowly, began to stretch the other way; the sun's fiercest hour was falling behind, but the heat it left still hung in the air. The old man, a little off, rose. He wound the cloth around his face again, covered his hands. He looked at no one — not at Sael, not at the three. He only turned and began to walk; back the way they had come, up, toward the mountain. To that old cave. To that dead gate.

The three watched after him. The man went from shadow to shadow, crooked but never hesitating; he grew small, entered among the trees, became for an instant a stain between the green and the white, then vanished. Tomorrow he would go up again. The next day again. Always again.

The three stayed in the shadow. Outside, the world still burned white; inside, in the cool of the rock, there was very little light, very little sound. For a long while they did not speak. Then Deniz, almost in a whisper, looking at no one, asked:

"How do we get back from here?"

No one answered. Sael bowed his head; perhaps he had heard that question before. Patrick made to say something, could not. Emre drew the notebook a little closer to his chest — in it now were unreadable lines and the image of a gate, and he sensed that neither was of any use, though he did not yet know why.

Outside, the sun slid slowly to the west. On the mountain, in some unseen place, an old man stood before that old cave, looking at the wall.

VII. The Threshold of Catastrophe

Indonesia. Japan. The Philippines. Greece. Italy. The screens showed cities sinking under water, people fleeing the shores, harbours collapsing. The numbers changed by the hour; upward, always upward. In the pension's common room everyone was looking at their phone, no one was speaking to anyone.

Farah was not watching the news. She was looking for Nolan.

Not by phone; she had gone to his room. It was empty, had been since morning. Tarık's room was empty too.

Yalçın came to her side. "Where are they?"

"I don't know," said Farah.

Yalçın said nothing. He looked at Farah's face. Her face was saying something else.

Before noon word came from the harbour of Mersin: a small tsunami, a few more boats sunk, the shoreline damaged. It had not reached the city centre, but it could.

The observatory issued its latest report: the Moon's orbital deviation was multiplying with every measurement. It was not a flat increase; the curve was bending upward. Accelerating. Cause unknown.

Yalçın read the report three times. He calculated something, deleted it, calculated again. He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

At noon a message came from Istanbul. From the section of the Voynich the Yale team had deciphered through the night.

The text was clear: *Each time the dimensional gate opens, it leaves a breaking in the fabric of space-time. This breaking pulls the near heavenly bodies. As the breakings accumulate, the pull grows. When the accumulation passes an irreversible threshold, the pull becomes inevitable.*

Farah read the text. Then she read the start of the section. Then the middle. Then she closed it.

“Every activation pulled the Moon,” said Yalçın. His voice was flat. “The small trials pulled it a little. Whatever happened that night…”

He stopped.

“What happened that night?” said Farah.

They both knew what had happened. Saying it was another thing.

Farah turned back to the text. Below, there was a shorter section still; on the first reading she had passed over it quickly.

The breaking did not only pull the heavenly bodies; it corrupted the crossing itself. *Whoever does not carry the image of the threshold they came out by does not return; they are imprisoned where they arrive. Whoever leaves their place returns; whoever leaves their time does not. Time bends the gate behind them too; the gate they came out of is no longer that gate. The world they arrive at is not their own world — resembling it but not it. The further away, the more different.*

Farah read the line again. Deniz, Emre, Patrick — all three had passed through the same wall. All three had not returned.

“They can’t come back,” she said. Her voice was low.

Yalçın did not answer at once. Then, almost to himself: “Noah didn’t come back either.” He stopped. “None of them come back. Whoever goes into time — one day forward, one hour back, it makes no difference — can never set foot in their own time again. Time breaks; the place they go resembles it but is not it.” His voice fell. “Noah fell so near that the myth thought he ‘returned.’ Nearness is not return; only a place less changed.”

Farah did not speak for a long while. That voice inside her — the one that had not fallen silent for weeks, that no one had heard — had been proven right at last, and being right was of no use whatever. The observatory's numbers, the Voynich's lines, those who did not return — all were far off, all were someone else's grief. There was only one thing that was hers, and it was not here.

She took out her phone. Her hand was trembling; she noticed, could not stop it. She drew off to a corner.

Kerem answered on the second ring. Behind him that kitchen again, their own light. His face this time was not tired but uneasy; he had seen the news too.

"Farah. Are you all right? Things there—"

"I'm fine." A lie, but a lie she could not explain. What could she tell him? What she had seen, what she knew, what no screen was saying. For months she had not been able to tell anyone; now telling was of no use either. "Is Ada with you?"

Kerem paused a moment — he had heard not the question but the thing in her voice. That aged distance between them, those half-finished sentences, became meaningless in an instant; they both knew, and this too stood between them unspoken. He turned and called back.

The small face appeared on the screen. The same red hair, lighter; on her cheek a mark again, this time from laughing.

"Mama! Are you still in the mountains?"

"Still in the mountains, sweetheart."

"Did you see the dragon?"

Farah's throat knotted. She had promised — if she saw it, she would tell her first. And she had seen it. Not a dragon; something nameless, worse than that. The thing in the cave, the thing coming

down slowly from the sky, the thing no one could stop. This could not be said to a child. Nor could the promise be broken.

“I saw it,” she said. Somehow her voice came out flat. “Very big. Very bright. But far away — don’t worry.”

“Is it scary?”

“A little.” She laughed; she was startled herself that she could. “But I’m here, and you’re there. We’re both fine.”

It was a lie from beginning to end. They were both under the same sky, and that sky was coming down. Between them lay a cordon, a mountain, a gate, and a distance that doubled by the hour; she knew she would never hold her daughter in her arms again, and the one who knew it was, once more, only herself. She looked at the child’s face, as if memorising it — her hair, the mark, the light in her eye. For a long time she had been seeing her through a screen; it turned out those were the last weeks she was storing up.

Ada began to tell — what she had done today, that she had drawn a picture, what was in the picture. Farah listened. There was no mountain, no gate, no Moon; there was only that voice, and Farah filled herself with it as much as she could hold.

The call ended. For a while she looked at the dark glass. Then she went to the kitchen, made a tea and sat. She did not drink it; her hand stayed by the cup, did not lift.

Yalçın moved into the room. He sat at the table, got up, sat again.

The last line of the message from Istanbul had caught in a loop in his head and would not come loose. For a while he waited motionless. The mind sometimes did this — it would stick at a point and not move on until that point came undone. This time what stuck was not the Voynich.

He thought of the symbol Farah had described. Three crescents, an inverted triangle, the tips intersecting. That day he had listened, held it in his mind geometrically, but had not dwelt on it — something else had seemed more urgent.

Now he stopped. His thumb went to the ring, began to turn it.

It had been the last week at Göbekli Tepe. The team was breaking up, the vehicles loading. Tarık had bent to carry a crate — no hat, the sun striking at a slant — and the back of his ear showed for an instant. Small, minimal, geometric. Yalçın had looked, had made nothing of it, had passed on.

Now he went back to that moment.

It was the same form. His thumb stopped on the ring. The shape had been solved — easily, as always. But the matter was not the shape. A man he had worked beside for years, written a paper with, trusted, had carried this behind his ear; and Yalçın, who had looked at that face for years, had never once noticed the darkness behind it.

Yalçın got up. He found Farah. She was in the kitchen, seated, looking at a point.

He sat across from her. “Tarık had it too,” he said. “The same symbol. Behind his ear. I saw it the last week at Göbekli Tepe — at the time it meant nothing.”

Farah set her glass on the table. She looked at Yalçın.

“I don’t want to believe it,” said Yalçın. This was an unusual thing — his saying what he felt. “But there’s a connection. That night Tarık and Nolan were at the cave. By morning both were gone. The Moon…”

Yalçın said “connection,” but he did not know how far back the connection went.

Tarık had been one of them even before he came to Göbekli Tepe. Through all those six months, in the same tent as Yalçın, bent over the same data, he had already carried that mark behind his ear — small, hidden, unseen unless looked for. Yalçın had seen it once, the last week, as a crate was carried; it had meant nothing. In that tent the only one who knew the meaning of the mark was the one who bore it.

The bag paper, too. For Yalçın it had been real work — the pattern, the question, two minds meeting on a riddle; a thing he was still proud of years later. For Tarık it had been a duty. The bag motif was a trace the order had long been after; someone had to set it down in academic language, with solid data, and Yalçın was the rightest mind to do it. Tarık had not quite chosen him — he had been steered. But he had sat and written that paper with him, laughed, argued, truly enjoyed the time. Perhaps that was the heaviest part of the betrayal: it was not false. In those months Tarık had been Yalçın's friend, and truly so.

Nolan too was of that circle. Yale was only the visible face that bound the two of them — a degree, a shared academic past. The real bond was far older, far darker: the same mark behind one ear and inside one wrist.

Yalçın knew none of this. He sat at the table before her, trying to fit the pieces together, holding as much as he could hold. What he held was only the topmost layer; beneath it, unseen, there were who knows how many layers more.

He stopped. "There's a connection."

Farah said nothing. She turned to the window. The Moon was visible now in daylight — it always was, but never this large. Never this near.

Once the tsunamis became world news, Tezgelen was no longer in the team's hands; the state took over the site. In the afternoon military vehicles turned onto the Tezgelen road.

The area around the cave was put under cordon. A wide perimeter. The team withdrew to the pension — not by choice; it had been said politely but plainly. The equipment was left outside.

Before he gave it up Yalçın shut down the analysis unit. He took his notebook. He took nothing else.

Farah looked at the cave's mouth one last time. The soldier on watch looked away.

The soldier was a young boy. Nineteen, perhaps twenty. His rifle on his shoulder, his eyes on the road; he did not know which part of Tezgelen he was holding, or why. He had asked someone that morning, and they had said "orders," that was all. When he lifted his head he saw the Moon — daylight, enormous, nearer than it should be. He tried not to look.

Auntie Şerife did not come out of the kitchen. As the world went under she was carrying a tray — gathering the glasses left from breakfast, wiping the stove, cutting something for the evening; because she knew it would be bad if her hands stopped. Once she came out onto the terrace, her eye slid to the mountains, toward where the cave was. "As if it ever lets go," she had said once, laughing. "It holds and holds." Now she was not laughing. She rested the tray against her hip, looked a while, then turned back inside; there was work to do.

Cemil went down to the shore. In the harbour the boats lay on their sides, one of them his relative's. A lifetime he had read these mountains — the temper of the stone, which cleft would give water and when. Now the mountain was doing something, and he could not read it. For the first time. He looked at the water, then at the

mountain, then turned back empty-handed. For years he had held that fine bridge between the village and the university; now both ends had snapped, and there was nothing left in his hand to hold.

Uncle Fahri warmed soup again that evening. No one asked for it; he warmed it all the same. There was no one working late anymore, but in him habit came before mercy. He carried a bowl to the boy on watch, held it out from this side of the cordon.

Above, the Moon grew. Below, people gathered trays, warmed soup, held rifles — this was what was in their hands, and they did it.

Through the night the reports kept coming. Each report doubled the last; the deviation was no longer spoken of in single numbers but in how many times it had doubled. The acceleration was not constant — it was gaining momentum.

The scientific world issued statements, governments gave notices one after another; emergency meetings were planned. The cause was no longer debated, because it was known what the catastrophe at the door was; the real question was how to live with it, or how to die. Maps were spread on tables, simulations ran, but none of them was enough to stop that vast oncoming ruin.

The Voynich text kept turning in Farah's mind: *When the accumulation passes an irreversible threshold, the pull becomes inevitable.*

The threshold had been crossed. Long since.

Late in the night Yalçın knocked at her door.

Farah opened it. Yalçın did not come in, he stood at the door.

"There's one more thing in the Voynich," he said. "It says that once the threshold is crossed the pull cannot be stopped. Even if the dimensional gate is closed."

Farah waited.

“You were right,” said Yalçın. “About Nolan. About everything.” He stopped. “You were right.”

Farah said nothing.

VIII. The Sixth Extinction

In the morning sky the Moon was far larger than a full moon. On the wrong day, at the wrong hour, of the wrong size — even those who did not want to see it saw.

The tremors had begun in the night. Small, intermittent; dust shook from the pension's walls, things toppled off the shelves. By morning fourteen tremors had been counted. By afternoon it reached twenty-seven.

The military cordon on the Tezgelen road had held all day. Then it could not hold. People came — it was not clear how they had learned, whether from the Voynich news, by word of mouth, or out of hope — and they knew the gate, they knew the image, they tried to get inside. The soldiers turned them back. The soldiers were not enough. The crowd grew.

Farah watched from the window. Then she turned.

"We know too," she said. "Let's go."

Yalçın looked at her. Not long — a second. Then he got up.

On the way to the cave the ground shook again. Longer this time, deeper. A wall cracked, stones came down. People were running. The military order had broken apart.

Farah and Yalçın went inside.

The cave was unrecognisable. Stone rained from here and there in the ceiling. There were no helmet lamps — Yalçın took out his torch. As the beam passed it caught on someone. In the corner of the outer chamber, before the small handprint, Master Mehmet stood. He had not come with the crowd, nor was he trying to flee. He had raised his hand, holding it a few centimetres before the print — not touching, as he had always done from the first day. It was a child's hand, that print, from who knows how many ages ago, and he too had had a child, who was no more.

“Uncle Mehmet.” Farah’s voice was barely heard through the roar of stone. She took a step toward him, her hand reached out: come.

Master Mehmet did not turn. He only, very faintly, shook his head — not from anger or fear; he had long since made his decision, this was where he would stay, beside his child. A stone came down near him. He did not stir.

Farah lowered her hand. There was nothing to say. They passed on. They went through the narrow cleft, harder now, faster. When they reached the deep chamber the ceiling groaned once more.

The ring was there. In spite of everything, it was there.

Farah put her hand to the wall. Yalçın came beside her, put his hand. Then each took hold of the other with their free hand.

They closed their eyes.

The last thing to come to Farah’s mind was her daughter — Ada’s face, that small face on the screen, the lie she had told, “we’re both fine.” Perhaps somewhere that lie was true. Perhaps somewhere Ada was safe, and that was enough.

They thought of the image: 2012, this world.

The ceiling collapsed.

And mankind reached once more for the forbidden fruit.
This time it was not a tree, but a gate.
Curiosity is the oldest sin.
And the most beautiful.
They learned the knowledge of the ancient age,
and became now the ancient age of the future.
The Moon falls, and all turns to ash.
The earth knows how to wait —
and kneads its Adam once more from a handful of clay.

The call ended after a while. Farah held the phone a moment, then put it in her pocket.

“We’re fine, mom,” she had said. “Don’t worry. We’re in Şirince.”

She reached into her bag. She felt about, and found it: a small piece of gum, the cheap kind, the sort with a fortune inside. She popped the gum into her mouth, unfolded its paper.

Have you gone back to the past?
Have you seen what is to come?
This knot will not come undone —
time is a blind, fast knot.

She was reading the last line —

“Farah.”

She turned her head toward the voice. She smiled.

“Yalçın.”

Author's Note

In this novel, the real and the invented are interwoven.

The Doğu Sandal Caves of Mersin are real. In the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, these caves — holding handprints and prints from different eras — continue to be the subject of archaeological research. Tezgelen, however, is wholly fictional — but if, while searching for it, your eye catches on the foothills of the Taurus, I will understand you.

The Voynich manuscript is real. The language of this fifteenth-century manuscript, kept in the Beinecke Library of Yale University, has still not been deciphered. The plant image mentioned in the novel does genuinely exist.

The bag motif that appears, independently of one another, across the world's different civilisations — Sumer, Göbekli Tepe, the Maya, Egypt, and many more — is a real archaeological phenomenon. The origin of a form that recurs to this degree without cultural contact has not yet been explained. Once you have seen it, it is no longer possible to unsee it; the seed of this book, too, was that seeing.

Nikola Tesla's theory of the ether and Ibn Arabi's concept of the aʿyān al-thābita are historical facts. The Anunnaki mythology and the figure of 445,000 years in the Sumerian texts rest on primary sources that remain a subject of academic debate. Three, six, nine — the rest of the numbers, too, you will find in those same sources.

And everything else is a fiction.

And finally: thank you for taking this book into your hands, for looking with me at the far side of the gate. A story is completed only when it is read; and so it was you who truly finished Tezgelen.

If, after closing the cover, you looked at the sky for a moment in a different way, or put your hand to a wall and waited for something — I need no more than that.

This book was translated from the Turkish with the help of Claude. If any awkwardness of expression has escaped notice, I ask the reader's indulgence.